

ISLAND OF SECRETS

by

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CHAPTER I

PLANS AND PREPARATION

LONG BEFORE the big adventure, David, Larry and Peter—always referred to as “Pete”—were inseparable. In fact you might almost say that their firm friendship was responsible for the adventure.

Nobody really understood just why they were inseparable, for as Larry pointed out, apart from the fact that they were all in the same class at school—and were all orphans—they had very little in common. “Unless,” Pete added with a wide grin, “you’d call being duff at maths a common interest.”

Larry, with his long gangling legs, his pale face and fair hair, was in complete contrast to Pete, whose small wiry body could never keep still for a single waking second. His fingers, when not tugging at the ends of his jersey sleeves, would be tousling his already wild looking mop of red hair.

David’s stocky figure, his sturdy legs and rather solemn expression gave him an air of dependability which was apt to be misleading, “Especially if you happen to be waiting for him when he’s out on one of his bird-watching larks,” Larry observed with a grim chuckle.

Their progress at school was average ; marks for exams never either spectacular or disastrous. Larry *could* have done better if he hadn’t spent so much of his spare time painting and drawing instead of swotting. Pete, likewise, felt that he could not spare much time for homework, preferring to do practical things with his hands. He liked the feel of tools and materials—especially hammer and nails—but as he lacked the patience to complete everything he started, his room

became a glorious confusion of half-made footstools, toast racks and model aeroplanes, etc.

His Aunt Edith, who had made herself responsible for him, complained of the untidiness, threatening to "make a clean sweep," and every now and then Pete would promise very earnestly that he *would* finish a footstool for her birthday.

David, with his flair for finding out facts ought to have done well at school, but, as he explained ruefully, "When there's an exam I never get asked about the things I *know*."

It was David's hobby that came to be responsible for the big adventure. He was keen on birds. "The posh name is 'ornithology'," Pete elaborated. "He spends hours hiding in a tent and could tell you how many spots there are on a spotted grebe, but if you ask him a simple thing like the date or the time he won't have a clue."

Despite their widely differing hobbies and interests the boys managed to spend a good deal of time together, even apart from school. On a ramble, David would take his binoculars for bird spotting, Larry would take his sketching pad, and like as not, Pete would take one of his flying models; or weather not permitting, would fish out of his pocket his latest space magazine and read out selected items to Larry and David.

It would have been difficult to decide which was the stronger loyalty, their respective hobbies or their friendship for each other. This very loyalty came near to being challenged when Larry and Pete called at David's house one evening.

David's Uncle Ben was a keen ornithologist. He took bird photographs and wrote articles for the newspapers and magazines, but this was not his real job; the money he earned from his writing just about paid the expenses for films and camera and apparatus, so he had to have another way of earning his living.

It appeared that his job required some delicate negotiations

abroad, and Uncle Ben had carefully arranged the trip to fit in with a visit to one of the bird sanctuaries on an island off the coast of Holland; the idea being to combine business and pleasure, making it partly a holiday for himself and David. He was outlining the scheme to David when Larry and Pete arrived. David sat listening, his face tense and contorted with a queer mixture of eagerness and embarrassment. "We'll come back later, when you've finished jawing," Larry suggested, but Uncle Ben waved them into two chairs with a casual gesture.

"Shan't be long. It's nothing private." Then turning to David. "I think I can fix up to stay at Mr. DeGroot's place. He'll be in Italy that month, and I'm sure he'll let me have his cottage on reasonable terms."

To Larry and Pete, sitting as it were on the fringe of the conversation, it appeared that David's enthusiasm was at low ebb. "What's up, Dave?" Pete said. "You oughter jump at a chance like this. All those birds to watch! Not to mench the trip cross the North Sea. Coo!"

David's dark frowning brows made his face appear almost sulky if you didn't happen to know that it was merely a cover for his discomfort. Uncle Ben, his dome-shaped, almost bald head bent over his desk totting up figures, appeared not to notice the hesitation. "It should be a grand experience," he said, "but there's no hurry about making up your mind. I must drop Mr. DeGroot a line. I'll just go and find his address."

As soon as Uncle Ben's back was turned Pete hissed aggressively, "You prize ass! You don't want to hold out on an offer like that. Your uncle might get the idea you're not so keen, an' call it off."

"Oh, shut up!" David frowned. "I'm not all that keen. We'll have just as good a time here doing something together."

It was Larry, with his keen perception, who spotted the root of the trouble. "What you really mean is that you don't

like going off on a swell trip without us." And Pete added, "You're a silly fathead if you let a thing like that stop you!"

"Just think what yarning we can do when you get back," Larry said slyly.

David shuffled uncomfortably. "It seems all wrong. We always share things."

"Don't worry about that!" Pete said, his voice almost husky with virtue.

"You'll jolly well have to go," Larry stated. "If only to give Pete a chance to be noble. We'll be green with envy of course—like we were when most of the other chaps went to France on that trip organised from school—but we'll turn our tear-stained ugly mugs the other way."

David gave a half-hearted chuckle as Uncle Ben returned. Still uneasy with frustration and indecision he said, "Don't think I'm ungrateful or anything like that, uncle—but—" suddenly he blurted, "I don't think I'll go, thanks."

Uncle Ben looked up from his desk, saw David's look of agonised renunciation, Pete's self-righteous belligerency, and Larry's frowning reproach; and sized up the situation. After a brief pause he said, with his lop-sided grin, "How about asking Larry and Pete if they'd care to come along too?"

David, usually unexcitable, almost shouted in his relief. "Oh, whoopee! Could they—I mean—would it be all right?"

"I don't see why not. There's plenty of room at the cottage—assuming of course that we get permission—and the trip need not be expensive. How about it boys? Are you interested?"

Larry and Pete left him in no doubt about their interest, and within the next few seconds David's enthusiasm had zoomed up to fever pitch.

After that of course they could talk of nothing else, and even such minor problems as getting permission from their respective guardians assumed major importance. Pete was

apprehensive about Aunt Edith. "There'll be no trouble with Uncle Mac if Aunt Edith says yes, but if she says no, I'm afraid he won't be much of an ally."

"I thought you always said Uncle Mac was tops."

"So he is, but he's just as scared of Aunt Edith as I am."

Pete discovered however that Uncle Mac—like many other peace-loving men—might give way time and time again on small matters, but would make a stand if necessary.

"Of course you can't go gallivanting over the ocean," Aunt Edith declared, when Pete broke the news. Pete glared, first at his aunt's sharp features, then at his uncle's round moon-face, almost devoid of expression. Did he—or did he imagine that he detected a slight quiver in the corner of Uncle Mac's left eye? He looked again as Aunt Edith gathered the cups and saucers, and sure enough the eye flicked in an unmistakable wink. "Dinna fash yerself, laddie," he whispered. "It winna be the first battle between the English and the Scots, an' ye can back the Scots this time."

Pete was taken aback. Never before had there been even a hint of opposing the very forthright, very English, Aunt Edith. Pete, usually argumentative—sometimes even truculent—recognised the need for discretion. "I do want very much to go," he muttered with a desperate tug at his cuffs.

"So ye shall, Pete laddie. Just wait a wee while. Have patience!"

Pete contained himself as best he could, fuming and fretting with anxiety for two whole days. He never knew what Uncle Mac had said to Aunt Edith, but as she handed him his plate of porridge she said primly, "Your uncle and I have been talking things over, and we'll see if this trip can be managed." Then, as the glow spread over Pete's face she added, "Mind you, it's not certain yet, but we think it might be a good thing for your education."

Pete of course cared not a hoot about the educational aspect. "Good old Uncle Mac! He is tops after all," he said under his breath. Even Aunt Edith wasn't a bad old stick

when properly handled. Just a question of using the right tactics !

Meanwhile things were not going too well with Larry. His guardians, Mr. and Mrs. Goodson, raised all kinds of objections. They said Larry was "delicate, and needed constant attention, having outgrown his strength"; all of which Larry dismissed with a snort of disgust. Still, he had to have their permission, and even the following week, when Uncle Ben had had word from Mr. DeGroot that the cottage would be available, they still held out. Larry began to despair, so in the end Uncle Ben went to see them.

"He'll do the trick—you'll see!" Dave said reassuringly. "You should see him persuading Gran to change her mind. He's the only one who can do it." Dave omitted to mention that Uncle Ben was Gran's youngest son and the apple of her eye. Talking to Larry's guardians might prove much more tough.

He did in fact manage to iron out most of their objections. His wide open grey eyes inspired them with his sincerity; and his easy friendly manner, aided by the dozens of tiny wrinkles on his high forehead, assured them of his reliability. He finally managed to convince Larry's guardians that the boy would *not* get lost on the Continent and that he would not be in danger of missing his meals or his sleep; and Uncle Ben promised that he personally would see to it that Larry had his full quota of vitamins.

So with slight misgivings they agreed; by which time David realised, with something of a shock, that his Gran was none too keen on the project. Only when she learned of the opposition Larry and Pete had met with did she give the trip her blessing, observing tartly, "Some folks don't know a good thing even when it's handed on a plate."

Raising money for the fare was another problem which required ingenuity. Having no rich relatives to fall back on, it was pretty heavy going. Pete worked feverishly on some of his half-finished odds and ends, and Aunt Edith—relieved

beyond measure—helped him to dispose of them to swell the fund. Larry painted some bedroom furniture for Mrs. Goodson's sister-in-law, for which he was handsomely paid, and Dave ran errands and did odd jobs for coppers.

It was quite surprising how the grown-ups, having got used to the idea, came forward with contributions. Despite Uncle Ben's plea for "only old clothes" the three boys were equipped with new outfits—blazers, flannels, shorts—everything, including swimming trunks. "Must have Larry looking respectable," said Mrs. Goodson, feeling that Larry, who always appeared to have outgrown his clothes, must look just right for *this* occasion.

"Can't have Pete traipsing all over foreign countries in rags and tatters," declared Aunt Edith, surveying with distaste Pete's ever frayed sleeve ends.

Between them, the grown-ups made up the money for fares and expenses. Uncle Ben guided things along by tactful hints of "getting through on cheap rates" and the boys, relieved to have things settled, didn't inquire too closely into details.

The date of departure was fixed for the end of term, when summer holidays started. They were to travel by road to the port, then catch the night boat to Holland. None of the boys had done much travelling, so even the journey was an adventure, and long before the time of starting there was wild excitement. But despite all anxieties they were in due course packed and ready for OFF. /

CHAPTER II

NIGHT CROSSING

UNCLE BEN's battered car—once bright red now a dusty salmon-brick—pulled up at the dock gates, and there was a triple exclamation of "Go-o-osh!" as the skyline came into view, towered with a forest of cranes and the masts of cargo vessels. This was it. They were really on their way!

Pete had been drunk with excitement right from the first purr of the engine, and declared that even the smell of the turnip fields had intoxicated him. Larry also confessed to a feeling of unreality, as if it were all happening to someone else. "Especially when I saw the labels plastered on my suitcase," Larry grimaced, "Laurence Mason! I couldn't believe it meant me."

"As soon as we get through the gates," said Uncle Ben, "you boys can go ahead and explore the docks. I'll be an hour or so getting the car checked through the customs."

The boys raced towards the quayside and stood spell-bound, gazing at the enormous boats, afloat in the water despite their great size and weight. A breeze blew across the North Sea, and the salt spray sent ripples of excitement right to their fingertips.

"Look at the gulls," cried Dave. "Bet if Uncle Ben wasn't busy with the officials he'd have his binocs. out." He fished his own pair out of the case, then handed another pair to the others. "Three into two won't go, but we'll manage with these."

"Oh, I say! Never thought about needing glasses!"

"That's an old pair Uncle Ben doesn't use much, but you'll find them handy."

Already Pete was focusing on the masts and cranes, while

Dave gazed at the gulls. "I say, Larry, just have a squint through here. It's wizard!" Pete said generously.

They strolled—with a slight swagger—along the quayside. "Look at those banana boxes swinging up there in that crane," said Larry, having his turn with the binoculars.

"Gosh! There's a car going up—just as if two giant arms were lifting it into the air."

"That's how our jalopy will go up," said Dave. "Look! There she is in the queue, between that elegant six-seater and the red bubble-car."

Dave stopped to talk to a bearded sailor while Pete and Larry moved on. "Bet before five minutes are up he'll know the length and breadth and destination of every boat in this dock," grinned Pete.

He was still grinning when Dave caught them up. "Just extracted an important item of information. Our vessel—the *Vanto*—is a three thousand tonner. There she is! The beauty with the bright red funnels."

"Gosh! Isn't she super duper!" This from Pete. Larry remarked that three thousand tons might sound a lot, but he figured it wouldn't seem so much when they got into the middle of the sea.

Dave's scornful reply, "Don't tell me you're scared," was drowned as a deafening hoot split the air. Instead, he said. "Wow! Mind your ear-drums! I say, old boy, what's up?"

"Nothing," said Larry, but his tone was unconvincing. Dave took another look at Larry's lean face, now turning greyish green. Larry shivered, trying to stop his teeth from chattering. "Just feel a bit groggy—I-like at exams—it's n-nothing."

Larry felt himself being dragged off towards the café, and heard Dave's voice shouting for hot coffee. He was dimly aware of Pete's protest. "Hot coffee! When there's ice cream an' lemonade! What the blazes—I don't even like coffee!" But after a dig in the ribs and a withering look from Dave he meekly sipped his coffee, looking with some

apprehension at Larry's clammy forehead, where his hair hung in limp strands.

To cover his embarrassment Larry stared at the notices, printed in three languages, hanging on the far wall ; and his slightly superior expression gave no hint of his thoughts.

As he sipped the hot sweet liquid the shivering subsided and the grey tinge faded. A feeling of shame surged through him. "What sort of chap am I?" he asked himself. "Feeling groggy—legs giving way—cracking up like any old sissy just because there's something exciting afoot! Will I grow up into one of those wishy-washy blokes, scared of his own shadow?" A shred of doubt began to gnaw inside him. "Would I—if I had to do something dangerous—would I funk?"

In that moment, as he drained his cup, appearing to be absorbed in the comings and goings of other passengers, he resolved that when the opportunity arose he would make it a testing time. "I have to know," he told himself.

Not for one moment did Larry relate his indisposition to the fact that he'd been too excited to eat for several hours. Dave and Pete, quite unaware of Larry's mental agony, prattled on until Dave spotted Uncle Ben outside. "C'mon! Bags I set first foot on board."

In the hectic race up the gangway they almost knocked down a steward, who, after accepting their apologies, showed them their cabin. They staggered after him along the corridor and down the iron stairway to the lower deck, and for the next few minutes their cabin, a four bunker, echoed with extravagant adjectives as each new marvel was discovered.

"Crikey! Look at this washbowl! A super bedlight! Gosh! Here's a wardrobe! All screwed fast to the floor." And then, as the boat swayed gently to and fro, it was Pete's turn to wonder uneasily if he would be seasick. "That sure was a funny lurch inside."

Uncle Ben suggested a breath of fresh air on deck before turning in. "Better see all there is to see," he advised.

"You'll be in bed in an hour or so, and there'll be no time in the morning."

The view from the ship was quite different, and Larry pulled out his sketching pad. "Those cranes and masts and funnels would look good on paper," he muttered. "If I do it from here I can get both sea and docks."

Pete decided on a reconnaissance. "I'll want to make a model boat when I get back, so I'd better get some details," he explained. And Dave, after a squint at the gulls, set off on a fact-finding expedition. The deep throb of the engines drew Dave down below, where Pete eventually found him, engrossed in "knots" and "oil pressures" and "gauges."

They rejoined Larry at his sketching point. "We're moving out," he said, adding the final strokes. The land receded, and for a moment they stood, silently watching the white wake which followed them as the propellers warmed to their work. Presently Uncle Ben sought them out for a light supper—milk and biscuits—and then to bed, where they dozed off to the accompaniment of throbbing engines.

The sun streaked in at their portholes, and after lurching across the cabin to wash and dress, they staggered up to the middle deck for breakfast. Uncle Ben was already on deck, peering through his binoculars. He stood—just as they had seen him standing many times—as though he could see another wonderful world. "Bird watching already?" Dave greeted him. "Are they gulls?"

"No. House martins. Must be getting near land."

"So these will be Dutch house martins?"

"Yes, but they're just like ours. There goes a tern. We're only about ten miles from land. We'll go and have breakfast, then see who can spot the Dutch coast line first."

After doing justice to the ham and eggs and porridge they peered out over the grey-green water. Uncle Ben first spotted the faint line of lowland on the horizon. "There it is, outlined by that row of breakwater posts. We're getting near

now," he told them. "See the cormorants sunning themselves on the sand at the mouth of the river?"

As they swung into the harbour it seemed alive with activity; big boats, little boats, fussy little tugs, all weaving their way between the buoys like a coloured crocodile. Pete, listening to some of the orders being shouted from the quay-side, exclaimed, "What a lot of foreigners there are. I can't understand a word they say."

"Shut up, you ass!" Dave hissed. "They belong here! *We're* the foreigners now."

Pete laughed himself out of his discomfiture. "Gosh, yes! I hadn't realised that. What a gabble it all sounds!"

The Customs men came aboard to examine passports, and then, as soon as the gangways were fixed, the passengers surged off in a scurrying mass, quite unlike the leisurely trickle which had filled the boat at the other side. The boys waited in the dockyard, watching once again the giant pincers swing the cars off the boat. So undignified they looked, dangling helplessly in mid-air. "Here she comes! Hurry!" they yelled as the shabby little car swung over and landed like a tiny toy in a miniature yard.

Shortly they were out on the road, marvelling at the enormous signposts with letters a foot high. "I say! Whoa! We're on the wrong side," Larry shouted.

"We're right here," laughed Uncle Ben. "Nearly bumped that van when I forgot and went left round the bend."

"Seems funny when cars whizz past you on the left, doesn't it?"

"An' they're all going faster than us," complained Pete, who had a passion for speed.

"I'll speed up when I get my bearings," Uncle Ben promised. "It's quite a time since I was abroad you know."

"Never in all my life have I seen so many people on bikes," marvelled Dave. "Just look! Swarms of 'em—just like ants."

"*And* uncles—with a few cousins thrown in," chuckled Larry, as they all gaped at the unfamiliar sight. Big people, little people, old and young, some in single file and some arm-in-arm; some were pedalling with purposeful vigour, others with casual ease.

"See the dykes here alongside the road? 'Spect you've seen pictures of them before, probably in your geography books," remarked Uncle Ben, handing out a block of chocolate to break up.

Pete said "Yippee!" for the chocolate, adding a snort of disgust. "Geography! Don't mench that word! It gives me a pain."

Uncle Ben smiled. "Pity you don't like geography, because if you have no grasp of the layout of land and water you can't really appreciate lots of wonderful things in the world. Only a small chunk of chocolate for me."

"You may be right!" Pete admitted sceptically, his mouth full of brown sweetness. "But I'd rather see things this way."

"So would I!" agreed Larry. "For instance, the geography book tells us what the dykes are, and their purpose; but it doesn't show you the houses on the other side, and the little bridges across to each house."

"How'd you like to have your own private bridge instead of a garden path?"

Dave was gazing beyond the dykes. "Just look at those masses of greenhouses. They certainly go in for growing things here don't they—quite apart from bulbs."

The miles of glass houses spread outwards on either side like a vast crystal landscape. "Wonder what Uncle Mac would say about these?" cried Pete. "He's green with envy because the chap next door has a greenhouse a foot wider than his."

As they skimmed along the flat wide road Dave asked, "How far is it to the island now?"

"Not very far. We're approaching the——" He stopped

the car, and a split second later his glasses trailed the skyline. "Quick, boys! That's a black-tailed godwit. First Dutch bird. Jot it down for reference."

They duly admired the godwit's smart black tail and gorgeous white wings. "He's a stunner!" said Pete. "What's this one coming over now?"

"Curlew. Oh and there's a redshank," Dave informed them, trying not to sound pompous. Then, as the car spurted forward: "*There's* a new one. Black and white wings."

Without looking up, Uncle Ben said "Oyster-catcher. Fairly common." And like a rude response came "Ter-chee!" from above.

"You were about to tell us what we were approaching," urged Larry.

"Oh, yes! The Zuider Zee. I'll be glad to see the old island again," he admitted. "I have a lot of old friends to look up."

Dave looked surprised. "I never knew you had friends on the island; except Mr. DeGroot, and he won't be there."

"No, Mr. DeGroot won't be there, though I have seen him sometimes when he's been in England. But——" Uncle Ben's face grew a shade more serious, "It's a sobering thought when I realise how long it is since I saw some of the others."

"You mean the bird-watching friends?"

"Yes. There's Mr. Jansen, the keeper. He must be quite old by now. His son, Freek is about my age. We have met occasionally at continental holiday camps, and we correspond now and then. But you know, we bird men tend to write reams about birds and never a line about people. I keep wondering about old Steen. He's probably dead by now, but I'd like to see his son, Johannes. He was a good chap."

Dave spotted a heron but refrained from interrupting Uncle Ben's mood. His eyes seemed to sink back, as if recalling scenes of long ago. "Yes," he said with delibera-

tion. "I must go and find Johannes. Like his father, he had a wonderful way with birds. He knew the sound and movement of every kind of bird on their island. I wonder if there will be many changes!"

"Why should there be many changes?" Dave asked.

Uncle Ben smiled, rather a twisted, unhappy smile. "You wouldn't know, of course, but during the war, some of the islands on that part of the coast were flooded over. That must have been a sorry sight!" Then, as if suddenly realising that it was after all a long time ago, he said, with sudden cheerfulness, "Well boys, I think the next item on the agenda is a good meal. What do you say?"

CHAPTER III

THE ISLAND

A MEAL! That was one thing both Larry and Pete had been apprehensive about. Would it be frogs and snails? Oh no, that was in France. Raw fish? Larry's stomach turned a somersault and he murmured something about not feeling very hungry. "Nor me!" added Pete, with an inward groan.

But when they were seated in the restaurant, surrounded by appetising odours, both boys found their mouths watering. Uncle Ben translated the menu for them. "Ham and eggs, steak and onions, meat and potato pie, fried fish and fried potatoes——"

They settled for pie, with rich golden brown crust, and an enormous creamy fruity sweet to follow; both Larry and Pete discovered that their failing appetites had made a remarkable recovery.

As they licked the cream from their mouths, Uncle Ben said, "Now I have a few jobs to do; some travellers' cheques

to cash at the bank, and a few business calls to make. All this might take a couple of hours, so you can stroll round the town on your own. You won't get lost if you keep some landmark in sight—say that glass dome over there. I'll meet you down by those gates at four o'clock."

"O.K.!" they agreed, and wandered down the street, listening to the chatter and feeling very alien. Farther on, down a side street, a small crowd gathered round a stall attracted them. "Let's see what they're selling."

"Might be ice cream!"

"No it isn't. It's fish. Shrimps or something."

They gazed with fascinated horror at the large—very large—woman behind the stall. In front of her was an enormous pile of small herrings, which she slit open with a sharp knife, her deft fingers moving swiftly, like clockwork. As fast as she cleaned them they were picked up by the waiting customers, who put their coins into a box, sprinkled seasoning on the raw fish and walked a few yards away to devour their purchase.

One big bulky Dutch boy held his herring up by the tail, tilted back his squarish head and lowered the herring into his mouth. He stood quite close to them and they noticed his fat hands and arms, and how the line of his jaw seemed to merge into his thick neck. "Just like a performing seal," shuddered Larry.

"Ugh! So it is true! They do eat peculiar food," Pete said uneasily.

"Well I don't see why we should object so long as they don't expect us to eat it," Dave remarked, feeling safe with the recent recollection of pie and fruit cream, "but I must admit that it makes you feel a bit cannibalistic to watch."

"I don't suppose it makes any difference to the herring whether he's eaten raw or cooked," Pete speculated.

"Well it would if I were a herring," Larry insisted. "I'd think it positively indecent to be devoured that way."

"Holy mackerel!" Pete staggered back, as if reeling under

a blow. "Just look! Greedy-guts is going for another fish."

They watched, as if hypnotised, as he polished off another fish; licked his fingers with great relish, and shuffled back to the stall.

"Oh, no! Not *another*!" breathed Larry. But the performance was repeated. They watched him devour six herrings, then moved away, utterly revolted.

They strolled round the streets for a while, keeping the big glass dome in sight, then gravitated towards the spot where they had to meet Uncle Ben. He was a little late, but when he did arrive he seemed in high good humour. "Stroke of luck, boys," he grinned. "I've managed to settle quite a number of things that could easily have taken days to complete."

"Good! Does that mean you won't have any more work to do?"

"Oh, my goodness, no! But it does mean that I can relax, and concentrate on birds for a few days. I'll have to come back to the mainland again once or twice—may even have to go to Germany—but let's get moving. I'm longing to see the old island again. I believe the ferry's just coming in now."

"What about the car? Do we leave it here?"

"Oh, no! We'll get old Lizzie across."

At first it looked as if the ferry would be filled with bikes. Swarms and swarms rolled on in a never ending stream, but they did eventually squeeze on, nose to tail with a van. A crowd of laughing chattering boys and girls who squeezed on, seemed to indicate that here also it was school holidays.

"Look!" shouted Pete. "The landing stage is moving away from us!"

"Idiot! It's us that's moving! I mean—it's the ferry."

Pete's face went as red as his hair as he heard the giggles from the crowd. "Good job they can't understand English," he grinned self-consciously, digging his hands into his pockets.

"Don't be too sure that they can't," warned Uncle Ben ; which of course did nothing to ease Pete's discomfiture.

A quick nudge from Larry brought their attention to one particular passenger, standing apart from the others—who all seemed to know each other. "It's the herring gobbler!" Pete hissed. "Gosh! He looks as if he'd devoured the lot."

The boy certainly did give the impression of being full to bursting point. He leaned heavily against the rail gazing at nothing in particular, his small eyes almost folded into the fat creases in his heavy bloated cheeks. He'd be about fourteen, Dave reckoned. Big for his age. And one thing they were agreed upon: he looked a bit of a lout.

"Could be prejudice about the herrings," Larry admitted, "but—oh, no—just *look* at his expression. It's not just the shape of his face; a chap can't help that, but he *can* help looking as if he owes the world a grudge."

And if anything were needed to endorse their conclusions it happened a moment later. A small white fox terrier belonging to one of the passengers came rubbing up against the legs of Greedy-guts, as Pete dubbed him. Out came his foot, with a savage kick which sent the dog sprawling.

"My hat! Hope there aren't too many of *his* type on the island!" Dave said with indignation.

Uncle Ben, overhearing this remark, said. "Why should there be? You'll find good and bad wherever you go—the world over."

As they approached the island the ugly scene was forgotten. Larry stared spellbound, and even Pete was impressed. The tiny harbour, with its cobbled streets and creamy white cottages with red roofs presented a picturesque enough landscape, but with the brilliantly blue sea in the foreground and the bright green fields and trees—not to mention the yellow sand dunes beyond—it seemed almost too good to be true.

Uncle Ben drank it all in with relief and pleasure. "Why,

it's hardly changed at all, thank goodness." Then pointing skywards he added, "See those three shelducks?"

Not to be outdone, Pete hazarded, "That one over there with the orange legs—is it a redshank?"

"It is!" affirmed Uncle Ben.

"Good for you!" approved Dave, with an enthusiasm which betrayed a lurking fear that Pete and Larry might get bored with birds.

Pete handed the binoculars to Larry, who became absorbed in the dazzling white under-flanks as the birds wheeled around. "Lots of birds seem to have nicer feathers underneath than on top, and you only see them in flight. I'd like to have a bash at painting them, but—I wonder how you can draw them when they move so quickly."

Pete gave him a funny look. "If you're figuring on sitting around painting birds all day long you've another think coming, me boy. There oughter be some adventure lurking in a place like this."

"What d'you mean—adventure? Isn't the whole thing one glorious——"

"Aw! Come off it! I mean *real* adventure—mystery—smuggling—an'—oh, you know!"

"Oh, *that* phoney stuff! You can get all that out of films and space magazines."

The words were lost on Pete, whose attention had been drawn elsewhere. At the landing stage several people stood waiting; among them a boy and girl. The boy was about Pete's size—maybe an inch or so taller—but thin, as if he might be under-nourished; yet in that fleeting glance he gave the impression of being alert and ever on the watch for something, his bright eyes darting here, there and everywhere.

Pete's attention was caught by the girl, who was almost certainly his younger sister. Her straw-coloured plaits stuck out, as he remarked "like my Aunt Edith's clothes pegs."

The boy walked a few yards ahead, as if searching for someone, and almost at the same instant, the loutish lad who had been gobbling herrings spotted the girl and made a dive towards her. Pete stared aghast as the big lad grabbed her arm and began twisting it. The girl called out "Jan! Jan!" as she struggled to free herself.

Pete made a dash to interfere, but Jan got there first and tackled the big one. Together they struggled free and made off, leaving the big one shaking his fist and scowling. "He's what you'd call a lovable character," said Larry with a shrug. Then with a sly look at Pete as they moved off in the car, "Just get your philistine eyes focused forward. Look at that canopy of branches with the sunlight filtering through—like little pools of dancing light."

"Aw! Chew that soppy stuff! Girl's piffle!"

The argument might have got out of hand if Uncle Ben hadn't interrupted tactfully. "Another couple of minutes and we'll be at the cottage. Hope you'll all like it."

As Pete stated, it was "a smasher," with cream walls and red roof, and spotlessly clean inside and out.

"It's to be fair shares with the chores," Uncle Ben told them. "We have all our own shopping to do, and any meal we have here at the cottage will have to be cooked by us. And," he emphasised, "We must leave the place just as clean and tidy as it is now."

This was a new experience for the boys. "I can wash up," Pete volunteered. "I've sometimes dried the pots for Aunt Edith. She believes in people being useful."

"I can fetch coal and light fires," offered Dave. "I always do that for Gran."

"I s'pose I can run errands," said Larry. "I'm afraid it's all I've been allowed to do. Aunt Goody is so particular that she never feels a job is done right if she hasn't done it herself."

"We'll get cracking right away," grinned Uncle Ben.

"Luggage in first, then the shopping. Now what shall we need? Bread, butter, eggs, bacon—oh and cheese; we must have some real Dutch cheese. Now who's going to the shop?"

"I'll go," offered Larry. Then as the awful truth dawned on him. "Oh, gosh! I can't even do that. I don't know the language or even how to reckon up Dutch money."

The boys looked at each other helplessly. "Never thought about that sort of problem! What shall we do?" they asked, rather shamefacedly.

"I'll write down the items we need," suggested Uncle Ben. "And you'll soon see the sort of shop to go to. Perhaps you'll pick up a few words as you go along. I think," he added, "that you'd best all go to the shops. It'll be a useful experience. I'll unpack and see to the beds."

Feeling rather like infants, they all went out, armed with the shopping list and a purse full of Dutch money. They wandered down towards the main street of the village, swaggering a little to cover their feeling of helplessness.

"Here's a shop, but it isn't a grocer's."

"Looks like a blacksmith's—there's a horseshoe hung up—but it's full of bicycles and spare parts."

"Oh, that next one must be the grocer's. Look, there's butter and cheese in the window."

They went inside and sheepishly handed the note to the man behind the counter, and to their astonishment he said, beaming at them "You English boys?"

"Y-yes," stammered Dave. "Do you speak English?"

"Just a leetle," replied the grocer, and to their great relief the shopping was completed without further trouble.

Provisions were augmented by a few tins and jars Uncle Ben had thoughtfully stowed into the car boot, and they prepared their first meal on the island. After tea of course there was the washing up, and then Uncle Ben said, "I think I'd like to walk over to Mr. Steen's house. D'you want

to come along, or would you rather scout round for an hour or two on your own?"

They elected to go along and, as Pete said afterwards, "What a jolly good thing we did, or we might never have got involved in the whole affair."

Uncle Ben was in a mood of suppressed excitement as they followed the road inland. "The Steens had quite a prosperous business, boat building down near the harbour, but I think the house was in this direction." He stopped the next Islander who came along and asked the way. The man smiled amiably, and seemed anxious to help, but no sooner did Uncle Ben mention the word 'Steen' than the man's expression changed. His smile faded and he pointed the way with obvious distaste. "*Het huis is daar in die straat.*"

"One gathers," remarked Dave, after they had thanked him and moved on, "that our friend doesn't care much for Mr. Steen. Wonder why?"

"I wonder too!" muttered Uncle Ben, quickening his pace uneasily. "I can't think why anyone should dislike either the old man or Jo. They were nice enough chaps when I knew them."

Outside the house Uncle Ben hesitated. It stood out from the others by one very unpleasant fact. Against the spruce and shining cleanliness of every other house it looked dirty and dingy and shabby.

Uncle Ben knocked on the door, and the immediate response was a pandemonium of howling growling dogs. There was a shouted command from a gruff voice, then for a few seconds ominous silence.

Out of the silence came the heavy tread of footsteps and the door was released of its chains and bolts. A huge bulky man filled the opening. His swarthy face seemed set in a permanent scowl, and tiny beads of sweat stood out on his coarse skin. He greeted them with a few curt words in Dutch, which the boys took to mean "What do you want?"

Uncle Ben explained his errand in his very best Dutch, but not for one single second did the heavy scowl lift from the man's face. As the word "Johannes" was uttered, a look of rage flitted over his face and was quickly replaced by one of cunning, then his features settled into a forbidding scowl.

"Nee Johannes! Ach! Hij is niet hier."

In the background came the low growling of dogs, and before Uncle Ben could either reply or protest, the door was closed firmly in their faces, leaving them standing in the street, shocked and bewildered. "My hat! That's what you might call the brush off," Dave said as they turned to go.

"Jolly fishy if you ask me," added Pete darkly.

Larry said nothing. He was staring at one of the upper windows, where a white-faced woman peered out from behind a tattered curtain. He tried to warn the others to look up, but as their eyes shot upwards she disappeared.

Uncle Ben looked deeply disturbed as Larry described the woman. "She looked ghastly—and either very ill, or terrified."

"I'm not surprised at anyone looking terrified of a set-up like that," Uncle Ben replied, anxious not to dramatise a situation which seemed already tense with all the unanswered "why's" and "hows" and "whens."

"D'you think you could have got to the wrong house?" suggested Dave, anxious to iron out the extra furrows on Uncle Ben's brow. "He could have just been mad at being disturbed."

"Could be!" replied Uncle Ben. "But I somehow don't think so. There was a boy standing at the end of that dark passage inside the house. I only caught a glimpse of his face, but I'd swear it must be Johann's son. He's the image of Jo as I remember him—a younger edition of course."

He sighed deeply as they walked away, muttering, "I must see Freek to-morrow and find out what's behind all this."

It was not until next morning that Pete discovered with

dismay that in his excitement and agitation he had frayed the cuffs of his new jersey. What *would* Aunt Edith have said !

But Aunt Edith was a long way off, and right here—under their noses—was a mystery to be solved.

CHAPTER IV

THE SANCTUARY

WHEN THEY woke up next morning it seemed as if the light was brighter than anything they had ever known. Uncle Ben said it was the white walls reflecting the light ; plus the clear air which made everything more clear.

It was a novel experience to prepare their own breakfast. Only Pete had ever done any cooking—sausages over a camp fire—but refreshed after a good sleep they set to work with gusto, sampling everything before and after it was cooked.

“ Let’s have the same plates for marmalade,” suggested Pete. “ Save washing up. I don’t mind the flavour of egg with marmalade. In fact I’d rather have it that way.”

“ Just as you wish,” agreed Uncle Ben. “ So long as you don’t expect me to conform. I don’t care for my flavours mixed. And you’ll have to put the kettle on to boil ; there’s no hot water till the stove gets going.”

“ Don’t let’s bother about the stove. We’ll be out all day an’ we don’t need so much hot water.”

“ What about your baths to-night ? ”

“ Oh, we can scrub up in cold water,” Pete said easily.

The question of the stove however—like many other matters during the next few days—was settled by compromise, and after breakfast Uncle Ben said “ I have some letters to do this morning so I shan’t be able to go to the sanctuary right away. How about wandering off to take a look at the island ? ”

Pete had a brainwave. "Let's go back to the house—you know—to see if we can——"

Uncle Ben interrupted with an emphatic "No! *Please* don't go near there again, not until I've seen Freek and one or two other people. Promise!"

"O.K. Promise!" they agreed, and set off in the opposite direction to the harbour. They trekked along the little winding lane till they could see their village looking like something out of toy-town. Beyond them stretched miles of sand dunes, and beyond that the sea lay like a flat blue-grey haze in the distance.

Dave pointed out a few birds on the way. He spotted a skylark riding high in the sky, then Larry said, "What's this little chap, pecking away here in the grass?"

"I believe it's a blue-headed wagtail," Dave said doubtfully. "But we won't count it as a 'spot' until I've checked up."

"I've just remembered. I think I saw a bat last night, just before dark," said Larry. "It came skimming over the trees and flopped around. Does that count?"

"Oh, sure! Let's jot it down. Larry. Bat. Ha-ha-ha—sure it wasn't *bats*?"

As they neared the sea there were deep ditches full of reeds, and Dave nearly went wild with delight when a long-legged creature rose from the ditch and flapped away. "Purple heron!" he cried, and the other two just managed a glimpse of his purple and yellow wings as he disappeared.

"Wish they'd keep still enough to sketch," Larry complained.

"Only place you'll find them still enough to sketch is in the museum," laughed Dave.

The tide was out, and as they plodded through the low scrub and scrambled over the sand dunes they could see the rim of tidal rubbish—like the scum on the side of a recently emptied bath—and amongst the straw and rubbish they

could see dozens of peculiar bulky objects, rather like huge dark balloons.

"Holy smoke! They're dead animals. No! They must be fishes."

"I believe they're seals. No. They're porpoises."

It was Dave who finally realised what they were. "They'll be dead dolphins washed ashore. Ghastly, aren't they?"

Even Pete's exuberance was slightly damped by the sight of so many corpses. "Seems a bit frivolous to suggest a game," he said. "The dead dolphins wouldn't make such a lively cricket team, and there's not another soul in sight."

"Yes, there is. Look over there."

If the shore had not been so deserted they might never have noticed the three figures in the distance, and as there was nothing else to watch at the moment they took turns with the binoculars.

"Seems to be two boys and a girl—an' I say! The big one is Greedy-guts, the herring gobbler."

"Gosh, yes! But he isn't with the other two. He seems to be trailing them."

"They appear to have lost something. P'raps he's pinched it!"

The boy and girl were obviously searching for something; poking about with sticks and peering cautiously round the edge of the dunes, darting in and out of humps and hollows. As they came a shade nearer, Pete exclaimed, "Gosh! It's the same two that we saw at the landing stage. I'd know those straw plaits anywhere."

"The girl whose arm Greedy-guts twisted, and the boy she called Jan?"

Pete nodded excitedly "Yes, an' they still don't know he's lurking behind that sand-hill. Could we give a whistle to warn them?"

"Sure! Why not? Come on, all together."

Their combined whistle echoed faintly over the dunes,

and the girl looked round, obviously hearing something. "They're taking the hint and moving off," reported Larry. "Goodo! That herring gobbler is a nasty piece of work. Reminds me of Bully Brook—the way he swaggers when he's pinched a kid's cap and flung it up on the roof."

"Wonder what they've lost?" Pete said as they turned to go back.

"I was just wondering," Dave said thoughtfully, "if p'raps they were searching for rare bird's eggs. Some people make quite a tidy bit scavenging for rare specimens."

"Could be! But where does Greedy-guts come in? Oh, I know! He waits till they get the eggs, then he makes them tip up and he sells the eggs. The experts won't mind who brings in the treasures, will they?"

"The real bird lovers would rather they left the eggs alone," Dave said seriously. "When people take the eggs away there's no chance of the rare birds breeding."

"Then they oughter be stopped," declared Pete self-righteously.

Walking back along the lane, Dave introduced the subject of last night. "Hope Uncle Ben learns something helpful from Freek. He was more upset than he made out, and I'm hoping it'll get straightened out so's he can give his mind to the birds. He's wanting to take a lot of colour pictures and he's spent a small fortune on films and plates."

"Well if you ask me," speculated Pete darkly, "there's more in this than meets the eye. There's goin' to be trouble. Just you see!"

Larry laughed. "And if there isn't, you'll jolly well make some, won't you."

"Oh, Uncle Ben's not scared of trouble," Dave said, missing the point. "You should see the trouble he takes with birds—especially if they're in difficulties—like when they get their wings gummed up with oil and can't fly. I've known him spend weeks of his spare time doing rescue work on the coast. He says that birds can't help themselves in

conditions like that, and so they're more in need of help than people."

"But that woman Larry saw through the window—what if she's in trouble?"

"Oh, come off it Pete! You can't barge into a strange house in a strange country to find out if somebody needs help."

During dinner Uncle Ben said, "We'll need sandwiches, so we'd better share out the jobs so that we can be off to the sanctuary. Must leave everything tidy."

"Lummy!" thought Pete. "He's nearly as bad as Aunt Edith. She always gets everybody organised."

"Funny thing, you never notice how much there is to do until you have to do it all yourself," grinned Larry. "Shall I sweep the bits up?"

But in spite of chores they were soon bumping over the rough road in the old car, on their way to the keeper's cottage. "Don't suppose old Jansen will remember me," said Uncle Ben. "He's quite a character. Always refused to speak any but his own language."

"But his son, Freek, speaks English doesn't he?"

"Oh yes, but Freek won't be there till evening. He works in a bank in Rotterdam."

The keeper's cottage stood on the edge of the plantation, and Uncle Ben pulled up and knocked on the door. A panel shot up, a nose peeped through, and a voice gabbled in Dutch "*Wie is dat?*"

Uncle Ben explained his errand, mentioning that he wanted permits for the sanctuary, also that he was a friend of the son, Freek. The door opened and they were confronted with Mrs. Jansen, a small dumpy woman with an enormous apron tied round her middle. She greeted them all, beaming "*Goeden Middag! Hoe Maakt U het? Komt Binnen!*"

The boys reddened with confusion because they were unable either to understand or to reply, but they joined

rather self-consciously in the laughter as they entered and Mrs. Jansen called to her husband.

The keeper, a dried-up wizened man with a face like a walnut shell, reminded them of Jack Spratt, whose wife ate all the fat and left him with the lean. His mouth, when he smiled, revealed three isolated brown teeth—like a triangle—one up and two down; and he spoke his own variety of Dutch, none too easy to follow.

The boys learned two words. "*Ja*," meaning "yes," and "*Na*," meaning "No," and they used their newly acquired vocabulary experimentally, sometimes in the right places and sometimes not. "Tell you what, though," Larry said. "I've noticed one thing that seems universal. If you nod your head they understand that you mean yes, and if you shake it they understand it's a no."

"Yes, and have you noticed that a shrug of the shoulders always seems to mean 'I dunno!'"

When the permits were fixed up, Mr. Jansen offered to come with them for the first trip, and Uncle Ben accepted politely. Later on, of course, he would prefer to wander alone, but there would be lots of things the keeper could point out.

"We'll leave the car here," he suggested. "Then when we come back, Freek may be home."

Mr. Jansen guided them past the notice-board VERBODEN, within the boundary line of the sanctuary, and Larry whispered. "Isn't it queer? I feel as if I ought to whisper and walk on tip-toe."

"Same here!" murmured Pete. And even Dave seemed awed by the atmosphere. A beautiful bird with a yellow head rose from a low bush.

"Female marsh harrier," said Uncle Ben. "Look, there goes her mate. Isn't she magnificent? In spite of the broad wing she moves with scarcely a flap."

Uncle Ben walked on with the keeper and the boys kept a little way behind. Seeing the numbered nesting boxes, Pete

remarked, "Mr. Warburton has one of those in his back garden. He says the robins come every year."

The keeper led them between two clumps of low scrub, then halted to show them a nest with five young kestrels. "Hold your noses!" Uncle Ben advised. "I'm afraid the smell is pretty awful."

They peeped inside at the young birds, all covered with white down. "Gosh! It is pretty foul isn't it? Why is that?"

"They're not very hygienic. They soon foul their nests—but they don't seem to mind the hum."

As they moved farther into the sanctuary Larry said suddenly, "I say, there's no need to whisper now, is there?" And Pete and Dave had to shout their reply above the noise of screeching, squawking, flapping and scolding. The sky was black and the air thick and the commotion simply appalling.

"These must be the herring gulls," marvelled Dave. Larry held his hand over his ears. "Moments musical! *What* a hullabaloo! Must be millions of them! Nests everywhere."

Uncle Ben called back to them. "Not quite millions, but well over four thousand pairs."

"Seems like four thousand millions," said Dave. "And I'm beginning to understand what a lonely bird must feel like amongst hordes of people."

The gulls seemed to sense that the boys were—to say the least—intimidated, and they screamed evil threats as they dived and swooped.

Larry and Pete were overwhelmed with the noise and confusion, and even Dave's enthusiasm seemed to reach saturation point. "You can get too much of a good thing," he grimaced.

Through the row and commotion Uncle Ben managed to convey that the keeper wanted to show them a nest of montague harriers with five pure white eggs. Pete and Larry wanted but one thing, but they tried to look interested. "It

might be music to a bird, but it's bedlam to me," Larry said ruefully. And shortly, when Uncle Ben suggested finding a quiet spot to eat their sandwiches there was no sign of lingering.

Mr. Jansen led them to the pine wood where the pine needles lay like a thick carpet on the ground, and gradually the noise of the herring gull colony grew fainter. The keeper must have shown his treasures to hundreds of people, but his enthusiasm seemed quite fresh. He sat with them and shared their sandwiches, and the boys joined in with an occasional *Ja* or *Na* as the conversation demanded.

Dave, who had cultivated quite an ear for unusual sounds, said suddenly. "Hark! There's a bird I never heard before. Could it be—you know—the one you mentioned yesterday?"

"What? The golden oriole?" Uncle Ben shook his head. "Can't be. He sings only first thing in the morning. We must get up early one morning to hear him."

"What is this then? It's new to me."

Uncle Ben settled for a black-cap, which they all recorded in their notebooks, then Pete said "What's that fellow? Silver-throated skylark?" An enormous bull frog croaked a few bars of his music from a nearby stagnant pool, and the keeper looked in astonishment as they hooted with laughter.

"Tell him—quick!" choked Larry, "or he'll think we're laughing at him." So the joke was translated for the keeper's benefit. He threw back his shaggy head and laughed till the tears ran down the creases in his face. "*Dat's krachtig!*" he exclaimed.

Refreshed with his snack, the keeper began to outline a trip to another part of the sanctuary, and the boys watched and listened as he gabbled and gesticulated. One word he kept repeating. "*Kluit!*" like the sound of a bird, and Uncle Ben explained that *kluit* was the Dutch name for avocet. Dave went wild with excitement. "The avocets! Are we going to see them now?"

"To-morrow morning," promised Uncle Ben. "Mr.

Jansen says he can spare a couple of hours if we'll come early."

Dave explained his enthusiasm to Larry and Pete. "The avocets are very special. We had some nesting in England one time, and then—what with floods and other catastrophes—they nearly disappeared. It's been quite a job coaxing them back."

The two friends made a brave show of interest. "Tomorrow then. Lead us to the avocets."

Meanwhile, Uncle Ben steered the way back to the keeper's cottage where the car was parked. Freek was now home, and the boys were introduced. He seemed rather younger than Uncle Ben, with fresh complexion and thick brown hair, brushed straight back from his broad smooth forehead. They talked for a few minutes on general topics, then Uncle Ben came to the point.

"What's happened to Old Mr. Steen and to Johannes?" he asked.

Freek raised his eyebrows, looking both startled and troubled. "We do not know for certain, but we think old Mr. Steen died in a concentration camp. But Johannes—he was drowned, not so very long ago."

"Drowned!" echoed Uncle Ben. "Why, what happened? Was there an accident?" Freek's face hardened, and he glanced at the boys, uncertain how much to say in their hearing, so Uncle Ben said. "Perhaps I'd better tell you what happened last night when I called at the Steen house."

He related the incident; the boys supplying details about the man, the dogs, and the face at the window. Freek listened, nodding as if he understood and was concerned. "Yes, that must have been Frederick. Johannes's step-brother."

Uncle Ben looked surprised. "I never knew there was a step-brother."

"Nor did we," said Freek. "Not until he turned up, a few years ago. He was not the son of Mr. Steen, but the son

of a Latvian woman who claimed to be Mr. Steen's second wife—a widow. This Frederick never lived with the Steens."

"Tell me about Johannes, please," said Uncle Ben.

"Yes, I ought to have told you more in my letters," apologised Freek. "It is so easy to think that others know what you know yourself. After the war, Johannes came back to the island and worked at the boat building. Then, about five years ago Frederick came to the island to claim the old man's property. It was all very peculiar because there was nothing to claim. There was nothing much left on the island for anyone after the war.

"Johannes refused to be turned out, but as there was no will, Frederick—as elder son—claimed his legal rights."

Mrs. Jansen interrupted to hand round a plate of freshly baked scones and a mug of milk, muttering (in Dutch of course), "That Frederick—he killed our dear friend Johannes."

Freek translated her words, adding, "There again, we have no proof. Johannes went out in the boat with his friend Joost Van Dongen, and they were both drowned."

"But how could that happen? Johannes knew how to handle a boat!"

"That is true," agreed Freek. "The people on the island think that somehow Frederick was responsible, but there was no proof."

Suddenly Larry thought of something. "Do you remember the man we spoke to last night? How hostile he turned when we asked the way."

"Gosh, yes! No wonder he looked disgusted when we asked for Mr. Steen. He must have thought we meant Frederick."

"Does he call himself Steen then?" asked Uncle Ben.

"Yes. He uses the name because it always had a high reputation."

"Which he must have dragged through the mud," exclaimed Uncle Ben. "Poor old Jo! I never realised I'd

seen the last of him ! ” Suddenly he thought of something. “ Did Jo have a son ? I thought I saw a boy in that house. ”

“ Yes. He had two children. I’m afraid things are not too well with them. Their mother is ill, and—— ”

“ Their *mother* ! Then that must have been the woman at the window ! Great Scott ! Jo’s wife—widow, I mean—and children, at the mercy of that scoundrel. Won’t bear thinking about ! ”

“ Look ! ” he added. “ It’s time we were pushing off now, but there’s a lot more I’d like to know about this business. How about coming round to our cottage to-morrow evening ? The boys will be glad to entertain you to supper—eh ? ”

“ Rather ! ” they chorused. “ We’ll do you proud with sausages and mash. ”

“ I’m afraid I can’t come to-morrow, ” Freek apologised. “ I have to attend an important meeting in Rotterdam, but I will come the next day if you wish. ”

“ It’s a date, ” smiled Uncle Ben, guiding the boys towards the door. “ Come on, boys, you seem to have acquired a fair amount of dirt from this very clean island, and it’ll have to be removed to-night. We have a date with the avocets in the morning. ”

CHAPTER V

UNPLEASANT ENCOUNTER

WHEN THEY MET Mr. Jansen the following morning he took them in a different direction. The track they followed was sheltered from the sea by a high embankment on one side, and on the other side, shallow ponds and little mud islands

were dotted about amongst the dense reeds. Half a dozen or so avocets were feeding in the water, their bills moving like so many scythes.

The keeper must have known every nest in the sanctuary, for he led them straight to a family nesting amongst the reeds. He picked up two young ones for them to inspect, and appeared not in the least put out when the parents protested. He spoke soothing words. "*O myn liefje! Myn Duifje!*" but they either didn't understand or didn't believe him, for they continued to protest.

"Aren't they wonderfully graceful!" Larry exclaimed; and even Pete grudgingly agreed. Other avocets floated in the shallow ponds or crouched among the reeds.

"Quite a number of oyster-catchers here too," said Uncle Ben, and as he spoke a heron quacked his disapproval from a quiet corner with a "*Fraank—fraank!*"

Larry began sketching madly while the others wandered around. "Drat it!" he said irritably. "I've got about a dozen half-done sketches, but my models always disappear before I can finish. I'll have to fill in the details and colours afterwards from memory."

"Oh, there'll be lots more chances," Uncle Ben assured him. "I shall be coming many more times yet. I've got the ciné camera this time and I'm hoping to take a series of pictures from the hide tent. I'd like some colour shots too, so you'll be able to paint your birds at leisure."

As might be expected, Pete's interest in birds was the first to flag, and when it was his turn for the binoculars he found himself gazing, not at the birds and trees, but at any stray people who happened to wander into focus.

He watched a small group of people who evidently had permits, walking along a footbridge between two arms of sand. Suddenly a movement behind a bush caught his eyes. Pete moved up the slope to get a better view. Yes, there *was* somebody. Jumping Jupiter! It was that creature again. Up to no good he'd be bound!

"You feeling all right?" Dave inquired, noting Pete's excitement.

"It's Greedy-guts," Pete hissed. "Lurking behind bushes again. Seems to spend his time sneaking—or bullying—when he isn't gobbling herrings."

"Oh, never mind him," Dave advised. "He'll most likely have a permit." He stopped suddenly. "I say—I wonder—half a mo!" Dave focused his glasses in the direction Pete indicated. "By jove, you're right, Pete. He does seem to be moving very furtively around those reeds—as if he doesn't want to be seen. P'raps we'd better mention it to the keeper."

He called to Uncle Ben. "There's that boy—the one we saw kicking a dog on the ferry."

"An' twisting the girl's arm," supplemented Pete.

"The herring gobbler again!" exclaimed Larry. "That fellow seems to haunt us, and he's hardly the type to be let loose in a bird sanctuary."

"We think he's pinching birds' eggs," Pete explained, as Uncle Ben seemed disinclined to have his attention diverted. By this time, Mr. Jansen, wondering what they were gazing at, looked also. "*Ach! die jongen Willem!*" he cried, shaking his fist. "*Och! Verdomme Toch!*" he added, striding off towards the culprit.

"So his name is Willem," murmured Uncle Ben. "Ah well, if he has no permit, Mr. Jansen will send him right about turn. He won't allow trespassers in the sanctuary."

Pete, watching gleefully through the glasses, reported. "Gosh! He can get a move on for an old man. Ooh! Greedy-guts has seen him coming. Coo! What a glorious sight. The keeper's waving a stick an' shouting an' the fat one's running for dear life. I say," he added hopefully. "Don't you think we ought to follow, just in case he needs help?"

"I don't think that's necessary," laughed Uncle Ben. "Our Mr. Jansen is quite capable of dealing with any culprit. We'll just wander around till he comes back."

"It's a bit like a route march following the old boy," Dave said ruefully. "Although I must say, he knows this place inside out."

"Some of the birds are ringed," remarked Larry. "Does the keeper do that?"

"Well, not all of it," said Uncle Ben. "I expect some of the local bird watchers from the Bird Protection Society will give him a hand. I understand he didn't take too kindly to the ringing at first. Said he knew all his birds without putting labels on them."

"Bet he did, too," Pete remarked thoughtfully. "And come to think, it's pretty wonderful—I mean all those birds knowing that if they build their nests in the sanctuary they'll be safe."

Uncle Ben nodded. "Yes, it's pretty wonderful, but it isn't quite as simple as that. Birds have their own natural enemies—apart from boys—and there's not a great deal one can do to protect them."

"Trouble is," said Dave, "when they're protected, they breed too quickly. Look at the gull colony!"

"Oh, the keepers have their own methods of controlling the breeding," laughed Uncle Ben. "They do it at nesting time."

Pete gasped. "Oh, so they go egg stealing?"

"Call it that if you like, but the female gull doesn't know anything about it. The keeper takes out an egg and pricks two tiny holes in the shell so that the liquid runs out. If he does it quickly and skilfully the gull sits quite happily on the empty shell."

"Well, I call that a pretty cute way of cheating the gulls," Dave grinned.

"If my Aunt Edith were here," said Pete darkly, "she'd follow him round with a basin and we'd be having scrambled eggs and Yorkshire pudding all week."

"Talking of food," said Dave with sudden anxiety, "we did bring sandwiches, didn't we?"

"We did. And enough for Mr. Jansen. We'll hang on a bit to see if he joins us again."

Pete hoped fervently that he wouldn't have to hang on too long. To his active mind and body it was sheer agony to be amongst all those climbable trees and have to behave as though in a classroom. He picked up an imaginary stone—it had to be imaginary because a real stone might hit a bird—and with all his energy, flung it over an equally imaginary mountain. Oh to get his arms and legs into some of those tempting branches!

Uncle Ben, sensing Pete's restlessness, said with his lop-sided grin, "There's a dead tree over there, Pete. Take the glasses and climb up to see if you can spot the keeper coming back."

With a whoop of joy Pete scrambled up the tree. "Careful now!" warned Uncle Ben. "Some of the branches might be brittle."

Snip-snap-crackle went the twigs and branches and the nearby birds squawked and scolded, but up went Pete; his red hair standing out like a fancy sort of brush.

"I can't see the keeper," he shouted down to them, "But——" he hastily adjusted the glasses—"I can see a man with some big dogs. They look like alsatians."

"Go on! You're making it up." Dave challenged.

"I'm not! Honest, Dave. Come up here an' look. Gosh! D'you know what? It's that terrible man who came to the door the other night."

Larry and Dave followed Pete up the old chestnut tree, and a moment later Dave reluctantly confirmed Pete's discovery. Why did it always have to be Pete who spotted people? "Yes. It's him all right! He's a long way off—beyond the boundary I should say—but there's no mistaking the brute. Didn't Freek say his name was Frederick?"

"Well, if he's outside the boundary it's no business of ours," Uncle Ben reminded them. "I suppose he'll have to

take his dogs out walking. He seemed to have plenty. I think Freek said he breeds them."

Larry now had the glasses and he spotted Mr. Jansen. "The keeper's coming back, just behind that clump of reeds. See?"

"Oh, goodo! Now we can eat. I'm ravenous. C'mon boys!"

Mr. Jansen joined them a moment later, and to Uncle Ben's inquiry "Did you chase the young ruffian away?" he nodded vigorously, rubbing his skinny brown hands with satisfaction. "*Ja! Hig Kompt er niet zo gamekkelijk van af.*"

As they sat eating sandwiches the keeper seemed in the mood for talking, and the boys had to listen and wait for Uncle Ben to explain. The conversation started off when Pete said "Ought we to tell him about that man Frederick with the dogs?"

Uncle Ben nodded, and passed the information to Mr. Jansen, and an excited gabble followed, out of which the boys recognised two words. "Frederick" and "Willem."

A moment later Uncle Ben interrupted the flow to say to the boys, "I expect you've guessed by now that the boy Willem is Frederick's son. We might have known—eh!"

The boys pounced excitedly on this item of information while Uncle Ben turned back to Mr. Jansen to hear the rest of the story, which seemed to be of deep interest to both, judging by their sober expressions.

Later, when the keeper had left them to conduct another party round, Uncle Ben said. "The old man has been telling me some very interesting things. It appears that there is a stretch of land over there, beyond the sanctuary, which the Bird Protection Society is very keen to have joined up as part of the sanctuary.

"The keeper is especially anxious just now, for two reasons. A pair of extremely rare birds have started nesting there again. They came once before—years ago—before the war; not the same birds of course, but the same species. Now

they've come again, and if they could have proper protection there's a chance they might hatch out and stay."

"Well, why doesn't the Bird Protection Society go ahead and get the land if it isn't being used for anything else?"

Uncle Ben's eyes narrowed into a hard glint. "The trouble is that the land, which once belonged to old Mr. Steen, now belongs to this stepson usurper, Frederick, and he refuses to part with it. They have apparently offered him a fair price, but he's holding out. What they fear is that he might sell to a foreign firm who—according to Mr. Jansen—have offered big money for the right to use the land for some special chemical experiments."

"Oh, how awful!" exclaimed Dave.

"Naturally the keeper is disturbed about this—quite apart from the fact of the rare birds—because any sort of chemical activity on that land would ruin the atmosphere of the whole sanctuary."

"That would be terrible!" agreed the boys.

"I should think everybody on the island would be glad to see the back of this Frederick and his son Willem," summed up Dave. "They seem to be a thoroughly lousy lot."

Uncle Ben and Dave stayed near the avocets to take pictures, so Larry and Pete, feeling that they had seen enough birds for one day, wandered off.

Larry, under the impression that their wandering was quite aimless, allowed himself to be guided in a certain direction by Pete, whose agile mind had been working overtime. Larry made no comment when they left the sanctuary; he was content for a while to absorb the calm peaceful atmosphere. But as Pete appeared to be on the alert—listening and looking—he said suspiciously, "Say, what's the idea? Searching for something?"

"No, oh no, not searching," Pete evaded, omitting to mention that he had steered a carefully calculated beeline for the spot where he had seen Frederick and the dogs. "But

you never know what you see and hear if you keep your eyes open."

"True!" admitted Larry, meaning of course something quite different.

As they approached a narrow tongue of land leading into the estuary, Pete gave a low whistle. "Now, Larry me boy, what have we here?"

Huge notices greeted them. Not just the *Verboden* signs near the sanctuary, warning people that permits were required before entering; but enormous signboards loomed out menacingly at them, and although not understandable, seemed to hold dark threats.

The tangled barbed wire fence held an even worse threat, which of course to Pete was a challenge.

"Can't say I like the look of this lot," Larry said, peering through and beyond the barbed wire. "Come on, let's go. We're evidently not wanted around here."

Larry knew, as soon as he said it, that it was the wrong thing. It was like a red rag to a bull to tell Pete he mustn't go near. As if magnetised, the barbed wire drew Pete nearer and nearer. "Careful!" urged Larry. "If it's a Government thing, it might be electrified. Those notices might be to warn——"

His words were rudely interrupted, and as if from outer space, the man with the dogs descended on them. "Get out, you English brats!" he shouted. "*Bemoei je met je eigen zaken*. If you are not gone in one minute you will feel the teeth of my dogs."

His face, as Pete said afterwards, was "like a suet pudding gone bad" and went patchy purple with rage and excitement and the two alsatians growled and snarled as if longing to get their teeth into someone.

Pete would have stayed to argue, but Larry dragged him forcibly away. "If you want to remain all in one piece we'd best put as much distance as possible between us and them," he hissed. "It's much too unhealthy for my liking."

Pete took a backward glance at the savage alsatians, fangs glistening against red tongues. "Huh! I like dogs as a rule, but I must say, they'd take a bit of getting fond of."

Frederick made a few menacing steps as if to follow, but he allowed them to escape, and eventually they found their way into the sanctuary and back to Dave and Uncle Ben, who were just packing up cameras and tripods, etc.

There was something so peaceful and calm about the whole scene that—as if by tacit agreement—Pete and Larry kept silent about their escapade. Seems a pity to shatter their serenity, thought Larry. But Pete's silence was not unmixed with a feeling of guilt. He somehow felt responsible and it made him slightly uncomfortable.

Uncle Ben however, appeared satisfied with his afternoon's work. "We'll have a meal out to-day," he suggested. "Let's see if we can find a café where we can get a good meal without too much strain on the exchequer."

The café they chose had huge umbrellas outside, and people sat at little tables under the lime trees. "I think we've had enough fresh air for one day," said Uncle Ben. "We'll have a proper meal inside. What do you fancy, boys?"

He studied the menu card and finally ordered for himself a plate of wafer thin beef and salad, but the boys settled for ham and eggs; two eggs each, and a thick slice of ham, served with an enormous plate of bread and butter—which lowered at astonishing speed. There was a dish of fruit pie and cream to follow, so conversation was restricted to the appreciation of food. "Never realised I was so ravenous!" "Could go on stuffing for ever!" and so on.

When at last they stood up, they were too full to do more than stagger to a vacant bench under the lime trees. Even in this quiet backwater, where nobody seemed to be going anywhere particular, there were still masses of cyclists; some wheeling round in circles, some ambling along and then turning to talk to someone.

Suddenly they noticed a woman—a big strong woman, sitting upright on an equally strong bike. She saw them sitting there and dismounted. For a moment she stood some yards away looking at them with obvious interest. No one spoke, yet they were all aware of her; and then she approached, addressing Uncle Ben in Dutch. "*Goeden avond Mijnheer. Neem my niet kwalijk. U come to de Steen's huis gisteren-avond?*"

Uncle Ben jumped up and politely invited her to sit down. "Yes, I did go to the house," he replied.

"*U zoekt Johannes Steen?*" she asked.

Uncle Ben replied eagerly. "Yes. How did you know about it?" The boys looked on with interest, wishing they could understand all she said as she tried to explain, in a garbled mixture of English and Dutch.

They gathered that she lived close by and had seen them come to Frederick's house, and she had heard Frederick shout that Johannes was not there. She now wanted to explain to him the sad fate of Johannes.

Uncle Ben told her that he had since learned about Johannes. "He was my good friend many years ago," he added.

"I am the widow of Joost Van Dongen," she told him in a mixture of Dutch and English. "My good husband was drowned in the same boat as Johannes. And we think it was no accident."

Uncle Ben refrained from reminding her that it was a serious matter to make such accusations. This was clearly no irresponsible outburst. Her squarish face looked so honest and steadfast, yet determined; you felt she would not easily be fooled.

Uncle Ben expressed sympathy, then asked about Johannes's widow and children. Mrs. Van Dongen shook her head sadly. "She is very ill—with the sickness of the heart. That Frederick is bad and cruel; but he is cunning enough to keep himself protected by the law."

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They gathered that the good lady, and her son, Kees, tried to help, but realised that it was more tactful not to interfere too much, as Frederick took it out of the poor woman and her children.

She also intimated that old Grandpa Steen would never have intended Frederick to have the power that he now seemed to have. "It is all wrong!" she sighed. "But we do not know how to put it right."

Uncle Ben nodded in sympathy, and in a little while she got up to go. She shook hands with them all in turn and wished them a good holiday, waving "*Tot Ziens!*" as she mounted her bicycle.

Uncle Ben recounted all that she had told him, adding, "It's a pretty grim situation."

Larry and Pete, after an exchange of eyebrow signals and nods, then told about their own unpleasant encounter with Frederick and the dogs.

"Talk about snake-in-the-grass or fly-in-the-ointment, he's certainly the menace of this island," Dave concluded.

CHAPTER VI

INTRODUCTION TO JAN AND MARYKE

NEXT MORNING during breakfast Uncle Ben announced that he wanted to do some quiet watching, and maybe some filming, which would mean getting inside the hide tent. "Might be a bit boring for you boys," he added. "Come if you like of course—if you feel equal to being silent and rigid for a couple of hours."

Pete was quite sure he couldn't stand the strain, and Larry thought he'd prefer to stroll around, but Dave hesitated, obviously torn between wanting to wander off with them and do some serious watching.

Uncle Ben said. "I might need help with the tent and camera," and Pete added encouragingly, "We'll have something to yarn about later on, an' if nothing exciting happens we'll invent something."

"I'll bet you will!" Dave grinned, and went off happily with Uncle Ben while Larry and Pete turned their noses along a slightly different route, alongside the sanctuary.

"We ought to do some watching," Larry suggested. "Just to show that we're interested. And I mean *bird* watching—not people."

"Oh, sure!" Pete agreed. "I like watching, so long as I don't have to listen to all that row in the herring gull colony again. Look! I'm not sure, but I rather think that couple of dark specks up there is a pair of carrion crows."

"Righto! Let's jot it down."

A little later they were able to record a sedge warbler and a flight of tern, and then Pete—who was staring, through their joint binoculars—said suddenly, "What exactly does *Verboden* mean?"

"It means forbidden of course. No-can-go."

"Hm! Well, just take a look. There's that Jan and the girl over there."

"It's a small island!" Larry reminded him with a sly grin.

"Yes but—they're sneaking into the sanctuary. Without permits you can bet your sweet life—or they wouldn't be acting so furtive."

"Furtively!" corrected Larry with a wry grin. He was busy filling in outlines in his sketch pad, but Pete thrust the glasses into his hands. "Look! They're scrambling through the fence."

Larry reluctantly focused the glasses. "So they are! You can spot those straw plaits a mile off."

"Well come on. We'd better investigate."

"Whatever for? It's none of our business."

"If they're stealing eggs it's our duty to stop 'em—like Mr. Jansen stopped Willem."

Larry grinned. "But you're more interested in chasing them than saving the eggs, aren't you?"

Fine distinctions were lost on Pete. "Come on," he urged. "We'll lose sight of them." His interest was stimulated also by their association with Willem. "If we catch 'em we might learn something more," he figured.

Once on the trail there was no diverting Pete; not even for a purple heron Larry spotted over in the reeds. They skirted the dunes and crept along the field path to the point where the other two had broken into the sanctuary. The girl was easy enough to trail, her two plaits contrasting vividly against the dark foliage.

"They must be after valuable eggs," Pete hissed as they watched them poking about amongst the trees and bushes.

Larry agreed half-heartedly. "But what can we do about it? We don't want to make idiots of ourselves. We've no authority to order them off. And come to think, isn't it awful cheek? Two English boys—foreigners, don't forget—telling two Dutch children what not to do on their own territory."

Pete muttered darkly about defeatism adding, "The bird people will be jolly glad if we save their precious eggs."

As usual, Pete's caution was outweighed by his zeal. "We'll make 'em tip up all the eggs an' promise never to do it again."

"And just how will you manage that?" Larry wanted to know. "We can't even say 'Hi there!' or 'Go away' in Dutch." Nevertheless he followed, if only to prevent Pete from doing something disastrous.

They crept as near as possible without being seen, but this part was far removed from the herring gull sanctuary, and every crackle sounded much louder against the soft tweet of a small bird. Pete trod on a bent twig and it sounded like

a crashing tree branch, but the Dutch children were so absorbed in their search that they never looked round.

A moment later however, as if by delayed action, the girl turned and saw them. With a warning exclamation. "*Haasten Jan gauw*," she made off, the boy close on her heels. Like two wild creatures they flew through the wood, skirting the undergrowth with astonishing agility.

"C'mon, we'll chase 'em out," yelled Pete, and with a wild "Yarroo!" set off in pursuit.

Larry followed, calling to Pete not to do anything rash, but he might well have saved his breath, for Pete's hunting instincts were roused and he was hot on the chase.

The Dutch children knew a few tricks about out-manceuvring a pursuer, and of course had the advantage of knowing the lie of the land. Pete crashed boldly after them, uttering threats, while Larry urged restraint.

Had it not been for the fence, Pete admitted afterwards, they would never have caught up with them; but the girl's dress caught in a nail or a thorn, and as she tried to tug herself free, Pete caught hold of her plaits.

The girl yelled and struggled, even trying to bite his hand, but Pete hung on grimly. And then, as the boy turned back to help her, and Larry caught up with Pete, the four young people stood glaring at each other rather foolishly.

"Let go, Pete," ordered Larry. "You can't go around pulling people's hair like that."

Pete relaxed his grip, and the boy said, in reasonably good English, "Why do you English boys pull my zuster's haar?"

Pete dropped the plaits and the girl turned away to smooth her ruffled hair and dress. "You've no right to go around pinching eggs," Pete said aggressively.

The boy looked puzzled. "Eggs! Pinching! I do not understand."

"We followed you," explained Larry, "because we thought you were stealing birds' eggs, and we wanted to tell you how wrong it is."

He looked bewildered. "You think that we take de eggs from de birds?"

"That's right! nodded Pete, trying to zip up his oozing confidence.

"*Och! Nee-nee-nee!*" he exclaimed. "You make—how you say—the mistake." He gabbled in Dutch to the girl and they both emptied their pockets to show that there were no eggs. "Empty!" they said.

"What *were* you doing then?" demanded Pete. "And why did you run away when you spotted us?"

The boy looked slightly uncomfortable, then he said in a dignified tone. "I am sorry, I cannot tell you."

Even Pete felt rebuffed, and all his self-righteous indignation melted into a mumbled apology, which the Dutch boy translated to his sister. They all shook hands politely to seal the truce, and the boy said "My name is Jan Steen. This is my sister, Maryke."

"Jan Steen!" Pete and Larry gasped in unison. "Please excuse our surprise," Larry said "but—" he hesitated, wondering what and how to explain. Obviously Jan was the son of Johannes. Come to think, hadn't they seen Willem twisting Maryke's arm!

Meanwhile Maryke, who had been looking intently at the boys, whispered to Jan. Then Jan turned to them. "My sister—she think she have seen you. Did you come to the house with—?"

"Yes, we did," Pete interrupted, almost shouting in his eagerness. "We came with Dave and Uncle Ben. Was your father's name Johannes?"

There followed an excited gabble, half English, half Dutch, and at the end of five minutes it was fairly well established that Jan and Maryke were the children of Uncle Ben's old friend. Thanks to Mrs. Van Dongen and to Freek, they also knew a bit more; and having seen Willem and Frederick, they were only too anxious to show friendship and to make amends for their rudeness.

When all this had been conveyed, Jan said. "I would wish to have more talk with you, then I tell you what we look for."

Pete and Larry nodded their "O.K.!" and he added, "You help us perhaps?"

"We'll help if we can," Larry assured them, and Pete added fervently, "You bet we will—if it's agin the herring gobbler an' that Frederick."

Jan's brow clouded. "Uncle Frederick. He the bad one. I tell you more but we have now to go."

They arranged to meet next morning at ten, and then Jan and Maryke ran off home, waving "*Tot Ziens!*" leaving Pete and Larry to saunter off to join Dave and Uncle Ben in the sanctuary.

Dave, having no notion that they had anything exciting to report, began to explain in detail how they had got themselves fixed up in the tent. "Funny thing you know, birds can't count. They watch two people go inside the tent, and they act very wary; and then if one person comes out they think the tent is empty and they act quite naturally."

"Very interesting," commented Larry, with a warning gesture for Pete to hold his steam until Dave had finished. "They're funny about noises," Dave went on. "They don't mind a whirring noise, or a buzz—once they've got used to it; but they're scared out of their wits at a sudden crackle or a rustle, so you hardly dare to breathe."

"Good job we didn't come then," Pete admitted. "Keeping still like that is just about the worst punishment you could inflict on me."

Dave smiled. "We got some wizard shots of avocets."

"Oh, goodo! They're the ones with bills like scythes aren't they? I tried to sketch one but the little beggar wouldn't keep still."

"Did you get any other good shots?" Pete asked.

"Yes, we got some oyster-catchers, one sitting on the nest,

and a heron having his lunch in a quiet corner, though he spotted us and made off. But we got a beauty of him just flapping slowly over the reeds with his long legs trailing—oh, and there were some coots on the reed fringes ; and one mother avocet went nearly dotty when she thought somebody had pinched her youngster.”

Dave gazed into space, as if recollecting. “ There’s something about bird watching—it gets you whether you want it to or not after you’ve seen a few things.”

Pete and Larry agreed, but with some reservations. “ You don’t want to let it get hold of you so’s you can’t think about anything else,” Pete advised, and forthwith seized the opportunity to tell about Jan and Maryke.

“ Gosh ! That’s interesting ! Let’s tell Uncle Ben. He’s just over there marking out his pitch for the next sequence.”

Uncle Ben was quite impressed, and more than a little perturbed ; not at the idea of searching for something—that he dismissed as juvenile dramatics—but at the thought of them all being in the power of the dreadful Uncle Frederick and Willem. “ We’ll be seeing Freek to-night,” he said. “ And maybe we’ll get a clearer picture. But I really don’t see what we can do about it.”

“ And we’ll be seeing Jan and Maryke to-morrow,” added Pete, who was all for heightening the drama.

After their midday snack, Uncle Ben said, “ Now boys, I’m going on to see the black-headed gull colony. Care to come ? ”

“ Oh, no ! Not more gulls ! ” said Pete with a mock groan.

“ They’re different from the last lot,” Dave said with a hint of apology.

“ Will they make as much row as the last lot ? ” Larry wanted to know.

“ I’m afraid so. Perhaps even more, because there’ll be a lot of other varieties in this colony,” Uncle Ben warned with a grin.

"Oh, come on, let's go!" Pete urged. "Who's scared of a few gulls?"

"O.K.!" agreed Larry. "I can stand it if you can."

The noise was, of course, appalling. Four thousand pairs of black-headed gulls and several hundred common tern and sandwich tern. Even Uncle Ben admitted that he'd never heard anything like it before, and that he wouldn't be so keen on repeating the experience. But for all that, the scene was impressive; the vast, almost impenetrable mass of wings—which wove patterns of black and white in the sky—would have had a beauty all its own, but all artistic appreciation was shattered by the shrieks and fiendish cries and calls.

There was an almost hypnotic fascination about watching their never-ending flight, wheeling in and out in circles and half circles and figure eights.

"Don't they ever collide?" marvelled Pete.

Uncle Ben laughed. "Watch them and see! I've never seen a collision yet."

Larry, watching the young birds swimming in the dykes, said, "How they manage to sort out their own families and relatives is a mystery I'd like to solve."

"Yes. You'd never think any parent could pick out his own offspring from all that confusion," Uncle Ben admitted. "But I have it on good authority that they do know their own young."

There was no need for a hide tent to take pictures here. The problem was not so much coaxing the birds to come, as keeping the masses away, and when they moved away from the gulls, even Uncle Ben breathed a sigh of relief.

In the quieter part he pointed out a bird who had just left her nest and was watching them silently and suspiciously. "She's a ruff—sometimes called a reeve. We'll just have a peep at her nest. All right, old lady, we shan't disturb anything. Now, boys, just come and look. Careful! Don't touch anything."

They peeped inside at the richly marked eggs. "She doesn't seem to be agitated or alarmed like some birds," remarked Dave.

"Oh, she's agitated all right!" Uncle Ben assured them. "But she's much too dignified to make a fuss or start an alarm."

"Lovely design! Almost chocolate coloured," said Larry admiringly.

"Mm! They're super!" added Pete. "I'm glad we came. It's been jolly interesting."

They tactfully withdrew from the vicinity of the ruff's nest, then Uncle Ben looked at his watch. "Time we went back for tea and a tidy-up. Don't forget we have a visitor coming for supper."

The tidy-up, the boys discovered, meant much more than a lick of hands and face. "We never did the chores this morning," Uncle Ben reminded them. "So come on, let's get moving. You sweep the floor and dust the furniture, Dave; and you, Pete, take this soapy cloth and wipe the jammy finger-marks off the paint. Larry, you'd better chop some firewood. We'll light the stove, then I'll lay the table."

"Wouldn't it be a lot easier to save it all till the end and have one glorious clean up," argued Dave. But Uncle Ben said no. He'd heard that kind of talk before and it usually resulted in chaos.

When jobs were done, Uncle Ben insisted on clean hands, necks and socks—after they had cleaned their shoes of course. And, with a keen look at Pete's wild mop of red hair, he added, "D'you think we could introduce a brush and comb to your thatch?"

"It won't stay parted, if that's what you mean," Pete said defensively. "It's not the same sort of hair as Dave's. His parting always stays put."

"Well just have a go at combing out a few of the tangles," Uncle Ben advised. "Then we must get supper on the go."

Pete, having acquired the frying pan, remarked, "I never knew there was such an art in making a hot sausage roll over in the pan so the other side gets brown." And Larry added with some feeling, "I must say—doing all these jobs gives you the idea that there's more going on in the kitchen than you ever suspected."

During supper, Freek—who was of course a keen ornithologist—told them, in excellent English, about a holiday he had in England at Spurn Head. "A wonderful place for bird watching," he told them, adding "The supper—it is—top-hole! I learnt those words when I was in England. I hope I use them correctly."

"Quite appropriate," Uncle Ben assured him. "But I believe the term is slightly dated now."

The boys were of course impatient to hear more about the Steen family, but not until after supper did Uncle Ben introduce the subject. Then he said, "Perhaps we can compare notes about what we've gathered so far."

Pete mentioned that they expected to learn something next day when they met Jan and Maryke. Then Uncle Ben said, "Meanwhile, shall we ask Freek to fill in the gaps for us, then we'll see what we can do."

CHAPTER VII

RECOLLECTIONS OF DISTRESS

THERE WASN'T a lot, after all, that Freek could add to what they already knew. All the people on the island were in sympathy with Jan's mother, but—as Mrs. Van Dongen had said—Frederick made it difficult for anyone to help, and took it out on the widow and children.

"Are they absolutely dependent on Frederick?" asked Uncle Ben.

"I think so," Freek nodded. "They have no money, and the widow is too ill to work now. Those who were not strong came out of the war very much the worse for wear."

"But how was that?" Dave asked. "Your country wasn't in the war like ours."

"We were an occupied country," Freek explained patiently. "I was perhaps a little older than you are now, and I can remember a great deal of the hardship. The whole of our west coast became a field of battle. Most of our lovely islands, and much of our dune landscape was submerged—flooded over by sea water and mud—and everywhere else became a mass of barbed wire entanglement."

"Afterwards we discovered that among the shifting sand-dunes, whole houses had been completely buried; goodness only knows what else might have been buried too. You remember the cabin that belonged to Mr. Steen?" Uncle Ben nodded and he went on. "That was completely buried. Our goods were pillaged, and everything of value that the Germans could lay hands on was dragged off to Germany. Train loads of goods went day and night till there was nothing left. Most of the island people were turned out of their homes with nowhere to go, and old women and children trekked through rain and storm in endless columns along the roads—refugees with no refuge."

"There was no transport left. Everything on wheels—even Mrs. Van Dongen's baby's perambulator was confiscated. Only a few broken bicycles without tyres were left. There were no trains, and even if there had been, there was nowhere to go. The weak ones fainted with hunger and fatigue."

"Where did the others go?" asked Larry. "You said the refugees were mostly old women and children. But what about the others?"

"Some of the younger men—and women—joined the Resistance fighters, some went to the mainland to work in the factories or in the potato fields, and some—like old Mr. Steen were sent to concentration camps."

"Did you never hear anything of the old man since?" asked Uncle Ben.

"Yes, we did hear something. A long time after the end of the war there was a letter from Germany, from a man called Zinkerman. He told Johannes that he had been with Mr. Steen when he died. This Mr. Zinkerman wanted Johannes to go to Germany to see him, but there was never the time or money to spare for such a trip. For a long time it was a hard struggle. Johannes married his Christina, and then a year or two later Jan was born, then Maryke."

Uncle Ben knocked the ash out of his pipe. "Well I must say, as you look round the island now, it seems incredible that such conditions existed then. It must indeed have been a hard struggle for everybody."

Freek nodded. "Yes, we were all busy. Some—like myself—catching up with lost education. Johannes worked hard all the time, but they were all very happy—until——"

"Until the ogre Frederick turned up?" suggested Dave.

"He certainly seems to be the Big Bad Wolf of the island," said Larry with a shudder at his recent recollections.

"What puzzles me," said Uncle Ben, "is why he should wait all that time before coming to claim his inheritance."

"That puzzles us too," agreed Freek. "In fact, we find it hard to understand why he should come at all, because—as I told you—there was nothing left of any value."

"Nothing but that piece of land near the Bird Sanctuary," suggested Dave.

"There's more in this than meets the eye!" speculated Pete darkly.

"But, if there *was* anything, the old man would have wanted Johannes to have it, especially as Frederick was not even his own son?" said Uncle Ben.

"That is true," admitted Freek. "But he is the elder son, and has the legal right."

"Unless of course there was a will," said Uncle Ben thoughtfully.

"If there was a will, no one has knowledge of it," Freek said.

"Maybe that's what Jan and Maryke are searching for," suggested Pete.

"If that is so, heaven help them!" sighed Uncle Ben. "They could search every minute of the day for a hundred years and still cover only part of the island. It's a hopeless job, what with the shifting sands and the destruction. Still, you can't blame them for trying. Their only other hope is to wait until Jan is old enough to earn enough money to keep his mother."

Freek took his leave, apologising for staying so late, and promising to come again in a day or two.

Next morning, after the chores and shopping were done, the boys set off to meet Jan and Maryke. "You coming, Dave, or have you a date with a gull?" Pete asked.

"I'm coming!" Dave said. "I want to be in on this." And as Uncle Ben had letters to write and telephoning to do, everything worked out conveniently.

Jan and Maryke were waiting at the appointed time and place, and after Dave had been introduced they squatted on the grass. First Jan explained in his stilted English much of what they already knew, but when he mentioned Uncle Frederick and Willem, his grimace expressed his feelings far more eloquently than words could have done. As Pete remarked afterwards, it is truly remarkable how one can rise above the language barrier by watching expressions and listening to the tone of voice.

"Is your uncle cruel to you?" Larry asked.

"Cruel? Does that mean not kind? Yes—then he is cruel. Willem—he get the best of all and we have what is left over."

"Can't your mother make him behave more reasonably?"

"Our *moeder*—she is ill and have need to stay in bed. She have de pain in her heart." Jan put his hand over his heart

and made feeble gasping sounds to indicate that his mother was in no fit state to tackle Uncle Frederick.

Dave expressed tactful sympathy. "Can't the doctor do anything for your mother?" he asked.

"De dokter—he come sometime." He gave a fine imitation of the doctor feeling her pulse and applying the stethoscope. He added that the doctor advised her to go into hospital but she refused, feeling, no doubt, that Frederick might treat the children even worse if she were away.

Jan made them understand how nervous and upset she became when there was trouble, and quite often he and Maryke put up with bullying from Willem and Uncle Frederick rather than make a fuss and upset their mother. Apparently Jan and Maryke were reminded many times a day that they ought to be grateful for food and clothes and shelter, which they owed to Uncle Frederick.

But in spite of the harsh treatment, the two were anything but subdued. Jan's bony, rather under-fed body seemed so alive and alert, as if with some frustration long suppressed; but his pale freckled face was clean and his light coloured hair well brushed.

Maryke, although she spoke only occasionally, entered into everything. Her bright eyes sparked as her glance darted from one boy to the other—as if registering their every word and gesture.

"Uncle Frederick, he say he own all," Jan said, coming at last to the point. "But we know that it truly belong to our father and now to us. Our trouble is that we have no papers—what you call it—documents to prove it."

"Why are you so sure about this?" Dave asked.

"I tell you," Jan said, lowering his voice as if afraid that the very grasses might overhear. "I have de *brief*—de letter—it was written to my father and I picked it up before Uncle Frederick see it. De *brief* was from Germany, and my sister Maryke, she have no English words but she speak German."

"Yes, go on," urged the boys, agog to know more.

"*De brief*—it come from a man who was with my Grandfather Steen in the concentration camp and he tell that he have a message of importance for Johannes and his family about the property. He say he write many times and get no reply, so Uncle Frederick must have the letters. The man he have been ill with sickness for long time. Now he is old, but he wish to come and bring the message. It is to tell where the papers—the documents—are hidden. He have promise my Grandfather Steen that he tell the words only to Johannes."

Pete's face glowed with excitement and at least another half-inch of cuff went the way of the rest. "Then it *was* the papers—the will—that you were searching for when we——" he tailed off with embarrassment as he recalled how he had seized Maryke's plaits.

"We search all place we know," Jan stated. "We know that our Grandfather left the paper to tell that Uncle Frederick—he not the owner."

"But didn't you say that you are to receive a message telling where the papers are hidden?" Larry asked.

"*Ja!* The message will tell where we will find them."

"Well, wouldn't it be better to wait till you know just where to look?" Dave suggested.

Jan smiled. "We like not to wait. We have the impatience to dis——"

"Discover!" supplied Pete with relish. "I too like discovering things and I vote we lend a hand."

"Oh, of course we'll help in any way we can," Dave agreed, with nods from Larry. "But—well—you know what Uncle Ben said last night about how hopeless it was searching on the island."

"Why not ask Jan to tell us more about the message," Larry suggested. "How will the old man give you the message?"

Jan then explained how Maryke, who knew German, had written telling the old man about their father and Uncle

Frederick, and asked him to write back to Mrs. Van Dongen's address.

"So now you're waiting for a reply from Germany, with more information about the papers?" Dave asked.

Jan nodded, counting on his fingers, and calculated that any day now he could expect a reply. "But we have to watch all the time so that Willem—he not know what we do. He listen when we talk to our mother, and if Uncle Frederick finds what we do he will tear his hair."

"I'll bet he will!" muttered Larry. "He'll do more than tear his hair if I'm not mistaken."

It was arranged that they should meet each day until Jan had his reply from Germany, and meanwhile of course they were all to keep their eyes and ears open for any sort of clue regarding the documents. "Soon there will be de letter from De Heer Zinkerman," Jan said with an optimistic smile.

It was not until Jan and Maryke had waved their "*Tot Ziens*" that Pete said thoughtfully. "Did you hear what he said just now? That name—Zinkerman—wasn't he the one who wrote from Germany asking their father to go and see him?"

"Yes, by jove!" Larry jumped up with excitement. "That old man is still apparently in the picture. Ought we to go and tell Uncle Ben?"

"Might be worth reporting," Dave agreed. "But right now I vote we treat ourselves to a lemonade."

"Oh, goodo! An' will funds run to a *Taarlje*?" Pete's mouth watered at the thought of the delicacies they had discovered in their favourite café.

They ordered—very nervously—in Dutch, and waited breathlessly to see if the girl really understood. To their relief she brought cakes and lemonade, as requested; and seeing Larry's interest in a pair of fancy wooden shoes on a shelf, she told them they were *klompen*.

"Have you cleaned your *klompen*?" Pete chanted as the

girl walked away. "Henceforth, gentlemen, we will remind each other to clean our *klompen* every day."

"And next time we come here," said Dave, "We'll order some of those fancy biscuits they call '*Koekjies*'."

"Oh, Whizzo!" grinned Pete with approval. "They look simply supersonic!"

Later, during dinner, they told Uncle Ben about the meeting with Jan and Maryke; and of course about Herr Zinkerman. Uncle Ben was quite impressed. "That is most interesting," he said. "It looks as if this old man might have some useful information passed on by Mr. Steen."

"That's what we figured," endorsed Pete, his mouth full of rich pastry and fruit. "It's bound to be the same man isn't it?"

"I think it must be. Funny how he seems to have popped up again—unless Frederick found an old letter, and wrote, asking for papers. I wonder if Freek has the address!"

"Will you write to this Herr Zinkerman?" Dave asked.

"I may do more than that," Uncle Ben replied. "But first I must see Freek."

CHAPTER VIII

PETE HAS A BRAINWAVE

"IF WE DON'T watch out," Dave said irritably, "these Dutch people are going to dominate our holiday. I mean—we did come for a holiday to watch birds—not to go chasing all over the island after long lost papers that might or might not be hidden here."

"Hold on!" Larry said mildly. "No need to get het up, Dave, old boy. Sure we want to watch birds, but we did agree to help Jan as much as possible. I know Pete tries to push us all around, but——"

"I do *not*!" Pete denied hotly. "I just wanter get weavin'—if only to give that herring gobbler an' his beastly old Pa one in the eye."

"Trouble with you," said Dave, "you always want to turn everything into a seething melodrama."

Larry chuckled. "That's true anyhow! D'you remember old Mrs. Martin, Pete?"

"Gosh, yes!" Pete laughed in spite of himself. "Wasn't it awful? For weeks I suspected her of some dark plot, then one day I followed her an' found she was only taking the washing back to a customer."

The dispute—which had arisen because Dave wanted to watch birds and Pete wanted to start searching—ended in a compromise.

Uncle Ben had things to do, so the day was more or less their own. For a couple of hours they all concentrated on birds, in a quiet part of the sanctuary. Then, as the time drew near for meeting Jan, they wandered out towards the dunes, where they sat, lounging, and watching for a pair of straw-coloured plaits to appear on the horizon.

Dave sat quietly scanning the sky with his binoculars, feeling in harmony with the world in general. The holiday seemed to be working out well, and there was no sign of boredom.

Pete picked up a piece of driftwood, and with the aid of a penknife declared his intention of turning it into a gull. "A quiet one," he insisted with a grin.

Larry was busily sketching as Pete whittled away at his wood, and a marsh harrier came wheeling leisurely on the air currents. "Majestic creature, isn't he?" Dave remarked.

Larry looked up, waxing poetic. "Just look at his rich brown colours alight in the sunshine! See how the extended flight feathers tilt gracefully upwards as he turns—almost like fingers of a hand reaching into the air for support."

"You feelin' all right?" Pete inquired, giving him a searching look. They all watched the bird sweep low across

the reeds to continue his flight elsewhere. And then Pete, out of the corner of his eye, spotted a figure coming towards them. It was Jan, and this time he was alone.

"My sister Maryke she have to stay at the house to do the scrub and the polish," Jan explained, adding that he himself could only manage to stay a few minutes.

"Why is that? Have you somewhere to go?" they asked.

"*Ja!* I have to dig de garden for Uncle Frederick, and he will be angry if there is lateness."

"To blazes with your Uncle Frederick!" snorted Pete.

"Can't Willem do some of the work?"

Jan pulled a face. "Oh no-no! He can do no unpleasant things. Only the work that have no hardship."

"We take it that Willem gets all the soft jobs," summed up Larry.

"What about the letter? Any news yet?" Dave asked.

Jan shook his head. "I have not de *brief* yet, but my friend Kees—he will let me know."

"You'll have to take care that Uncle Frederick doesn't get wind of it," Larry advised. And then Pete said suddenly.

"Yippee! I've just had a supersonic brainwave!"

"Oh, no! Not another!" Dave said with mock horror.

"Listen! It's an absolute thousand pounder. It came to me in a flash when Larry mentioned about not letting Uncle Frederick get wind of any message. Well what about seeing to it that they *do* get a message—a false one—something that'll keep 'em both very busy and out of mischief?"

"Gosh! I believe you've got something there, Pete," Larry marvelled. And Dave looked quite impressed. "Yes, it's a wow of an idea! If that Uncle Frederick gets a notion that papers are hidden in some special place he'll sure go for them—but it'll want careful thinking out."

Meanwhile Jan gazed, nonplussed from one to the other, feeling that he could appreciate their excitement much better if he could understand all they were saying, but they spoke so quickly.

They tried to present the idea to him, but as they all gabbled at once, Jan was more perplexed than ever. He laughed, and by gestures made them understand, "One boy do the talking instead of all three."

"You talk, Dave!" Pete grinned. "I'm—I'm——"

"Incoherent!" laughed Larry. "Stunned by the enormity of your idea, eh! Go ahead, Dave. We'll dry up."

So Dave tried with simple words to explain to Jan what they had in mind, and they were amazed how quickly Jan responded. "*Ja!* I understand," he beamed. "I make Uncle Frederick think I have de message and send him wrong place."

"Ah, but hang on a bit," Larry cautioned. "This idea is too priceless to muck up. Let's chew it over a bit. We might think up something cute—something that will really get them worried."

"Yes, and something that will make them work. We could make the two of them sweat," Dave added. And even Pete, who was burning with impatience, could see the wisdom of waiting a while. "O.K.! We'll cook up something terrific!" he agreed.

To show his gratitude for all their help and interest Jan insisted on shaking hands with all of them. "I thank you for help, my friends," he said, his face aglow with enthusiasm. "Now I have the hope that all will come good for my *moeder*."

"We think it will too," Dave assured him. "We'll do all we can to help."

But when Jan had gone they found it difficult to recapture the lazy relaxed atmosphere. Larry returned to his sketching, Dave to his binoculars and Pete to his carving. "Drat this gull!" he said irritably. "He's coming the wrong shape."

"I'd settle for a boat if I were you," advised Larry. "Bit rash weren't you, starting a bird with an old piece of driftwood like that?"

"No. It has to be a bird," Pete insisted. "A chap in our

woodwork class is a wizard at carving figures. He makes little men and animals." He handled the wood again to get the feel of it. "Bit on the soft side for this sort of job, but I'll make it do."

When Jan departed, Larry had flicked a wink over Dave's head, and in that flick of a wink there was mutual recognition that for the time being there should be no more talk of "plots." For Dave's sake it had to be birds. "I'll have a bash at this gull," he said, his tongue between his teeth, "even if it turns out like Micky Mouse."

Larry turned to Dave. "Tell us about the films you took with Uncle Ben. What sort of shots were they?"

Dave came to life. "Oh, Uncle Ben spotted a nest of montague harriers under a low bush near the ground. They were pure white, without a spot or a mark of any sort; just ready for hatching out. Don't know how he knew. It's uncanny how he seems to know what's going to happen."

Pete gaped. "An' you actually filmed the eggs hatching out?"

"Oh, yes! At least we think we got them; but of course you never know for sure until the film is developed."

Larry scanned his notebook. "I saw some coots yesterday. At least I heard them first; they clucked a bit like the hens in Mrs. Mason's backyard."

Dave beamed with patronising appreciation. Pete said it was the kind of look that Old Froggy gave them when at long last they got a glimmer of what he'd been driving at. He said, "You know, Dave old man, I really think you oughter take up this bird-watching lark properly when you leave school."

"It's what I'd like to do of course," Dave admitted. "But Gran wants me to have what she calls a safe job—you know—up at seven-thirty, catching the eight-fifteen with a brief-case and shoes polished. Not like Uncle Ben, coming in at all odd times—sometimes in great wading boots and dirty old raincoat."

"Still," Larry argued, "it's better to start off with some safe job and keep this as a hobby—until you've got a lot more experience."

"You're a fine one to talk that way! Don't you want to be an artist?"

"Sure I do! But that doesn't mean I can sit and paint pictures all day. I'll have to learn a lot of other things, then p'raps specialise in some branch of art—like designing or advertising—if I'm good enough. If not, I'll have to take what I can get."

Pete had no time for this kind of conversation. "Look!" he shouted, and got them both gaping into the sky. By the time they discovered it was only a seagull he had created quite a diversion. "Let's move on," he suggested. "We've had enough jawing about the future."

Pete's vision of the future stretched no farther than tomorrow—or at most next week; and, so long as there was enough ice cream and lemonade to last that long, he was perfectly happy and satisfied.

"It's time we moved over to the sanctuary," Dave realised. "Uncle Ben is filming another special nest with the young just hatched. Both parents spend all day foraging for food. The young 'uns never seem to be stuffed."

On the way, Larry and Pete spotted an oyster-catcher and some coots. "By the way," said Pete, "does the oyster-catcher really catch oysters?"

"I don't think so," laughed Dave. "But we'll ask Uncle Ben. He's around here somewhere."

They found Uncle Ben searching for the golden oriole. "We won't be able to hear him," he said regretfully. "He only sings early in the morning."

"Then we'll have to get up with the lark one morning," said Pete with a sly dig at Larry, who was always last out of bed.

"Yes, p'raps we'd better do that," Uncle Ben nodded. "He's a shy little bird and gets frightened off with the

slightest commotion. In any case I'll have to be up very early or I won't have time to do all the filming I'd hoped to do." Then before Dave had time to ask any questions he said, "Sh! I'm just going back to the tent. I want to finish off a few shots of the avocets."

This time he took Larry to act as decoy, and when they were gone, Dave said with a worried frown. "Wonder what he meant about having all that filming to do. Surely there's bags of time."

It was not until they were all together again that Uncle Ben reopened the subject. "I'm afraid, boys, that I may have to make a large hole in my holiday."

Three faces looked at him in dismay. "D'you mean we have to go back home?"

"Oh, no!" Uncle Ben laughed reassuringly. "Don't get alarmed. It's only that I have to take a trip to Germany. What I can't make up my mind about is whether to take you all with me or leave you here to fend for yourselves."

CHAPTER IX

PETE'S PLAN DEVELOPS

UNCLE BEN'S words—to say the least—caused consternation; diluted of course with other feelings.

To go with Uncle Ben to Germany! Or to stay on the island, fending for themselves! Both prospects were wildly exciting, especially when Pete said suddenly, "Will you be going to see that man Zinkerman?"

"Yes, I did have that in mind. I've seen Freek, and the address is not a great distance from the place I have to visit. Freek may go along too, if he can arrange to have some of his holiday immediately."

"And—what about us?" Dave said, his voice rising at least three tones in his excitement.

"Well, that's the problem. I hadn't reckoned on having to go to Germany. I hoped I might manage with letters and phone calls, but now I find I have to go, and I'm afraid it's not going to be much fun for you boys."

During the few minutes as they walked back to the cottage, the boys had been reflecting. Be much more fun staying on here, thought Pete. We could really get cracking on this plan to outwit Uncle Frederick.

It might be exciting to go to Germany, Larry thought. But there's still an awful lot to see and do here on the island.

"So *that's* what's been biting the old boy," thought Dave. "Couldn't make out why he's been so preoccupied. No wonder he's worried! What's to happen about the photographs if he insists on dragging us off to Germany?"

It took only a matter of seconds for them to communicate by eyebrow signals, and when Dave was sure what Pete and Larry wanted, he said. "If you have to go to Germany, wouldn't you get along much quicker without having to bother about us?"

"You have a point there," agreed Uncle Ben. "But you *are* under my care, and I'm responsible for you."

"What rot!" snorted Dave belligerently, then wisely kept quiet until they were inside, preparing their meal.

"One of you please see that the potatoes don't boil dry, and someone turn the chops or they'll be burnt on one side and raw on the other," Uncle Ben said.

"I'll see to the spuds," offered Larry. "If there's one thing I can't cope with it's a sizzling spitting chop. Hi, Dave, bring the tomato sauce while you're near the cupboard."

As dinner got under way, Dave asked. "When d'you have to go?"

"Maybe to-morrow, or at least the day after. I'll see

Freek to-night, then we'll know what he's been able to arrange."

"And how long will you be away?" Both questions were framed, assuming that he was leaving them behind.

"It depends, I'm afraid, on a number of things. My interview may take some time, then if we go to see Zinkerman it may take a while to convince him that we're *bona fide*."

"Still, it'd be awfully thrilling if you could find out for Jan and his mother all about these documents."

"Yes. Both Freek and I feel that we'd like to do something to help Johannes's widow and children. It's an impossible situation for them there with that man Frederick."

For a fleeting moment Dave wondered whether to tell him about their plan to foil Uncle Frederick, but decided, "Better not! He might get windy if he thinks we're up to larks of any sort."

"Pity about your films though," Larry said. "Didn't you intend taking a sequence, that needed someone there at least once a day?"

"I could do those of course," Dave said quickly. "I know how to use the cameras, and how to adjust the aperture for light and the shutter for speed."

"Sure!" Pete added, with undue haste. "We'll do anything we can to help Dave so's he can get the pictures all right."

Uncle Ben thanked them with a grin, but his amusement was not unmixed with relief. "I'm beginning to get the idea that you young blighters actually want to be rid of me. Could I be wrong?"

He tactfully refrained from pressing the point. "The fact is, I'm rather relieved that you're not so keen on going. There are fewer complications if I leave you here. Now I wonder if Mrs. Jansen would take you in for a few days as P.G's."

"But why can't we stay here?" Dave said, voicing the dismay registered on three faces. "We can fend for ourselves

and look after things here—and we know the drill about washing up and keeping things clean and tidy.”

“Oh sure, we do!” Pete echoed virtuously.

“If you park us out, it makes us feel pretty feeble, as if you had no confidence in us,” Larry pointed out.

“Very neatly put, Larry,” smiled Uncle Ben. “And I believe you win. I don’t suppose it will do you any harm, and responsibility is always good experience. It’s just that I promised your guardians that I’d see you came to no harm, and they might feel I’d neglected you.”

“Neglected my foot!” stated Pete inelegantly.

“What bosh!” reiterated Dave.

The boys promised in all seriousness that if the slightest mishap arose, they would contact either Mrs. Jansen or Mrs. Van Dongen, and Uncle Ben sighed with relief that one part of his problem was solved.

“And if you feel inclined to have a go with the cameras I shan’t complain if you spoil a few feet of film,” he added. “I’ve waited a long time for an opportunity to try this particular sequence.”

“We’ll do our best,” Dave assured him, adding as an afterthought, “I say—what if you don’t get back in time for the boat?”

“Oh, I *must* get back—before that, I hope. The passage is booked. Besides, your folks might get upset if you weren’t back in time for the start of school term.”

“Gosh, as if that mattered!” exclaimed Pete. “Even Aunt Edith would see sweet reason on a matter of such importance.” And Larry was equally certain that his god-parents would raise no objection, adding a silent rider that it wouldn’t matter anyhow. It would be too late to make any difference.

During dinner they talked about the possibility of finding any missing documents. “Jan seems pretty certain that there *are* documents somewhere, proving their rights,” Dave said.

"Yes," Uncle Ben nodded. "From what I've been able to gather, it's almost certain that old Mr. Steen would never intend to leave things this way; which leads me to think that Herr Zinkerman may have them."

"But Jan thinks they're somewhere on the island."

"Oh, that's nonsense! He wouldn't talk that way if he could have known what it was like here during the war. You heard what Freek said about the island being flooded."

"Still, he may have found a safe place somewhere," Pete persisted.

"There *were* no safe places; everything was taken over by the Nazis, and there was no one you could trust." Suddenly Uncle Ben looked at his watch. "Look," he said, "I'm just realising that this *could* be almost my last day here with you and there were so many things I wanted to show you. I'd like to make the most of these few hours, so how about a hike over the downs? I could point out a few places of interest."

"Suits us!" they all said agreeably. And when the dishes were washed they set off towards the rising slope which was the highest part of the island.

"Grand breeze up here. Get your lungs full," Uncle Ben recommended. "And you might as well get your eyes full too. You can see practically the whole island from here on a clear day."

The village unfolded into a setting of golden sand and grassy hillocks, with an almost unbelievable variation in trees and colour, and through it all shimmered the sea, bright blue with white clouds reflected here and there.

"Makes your fingers itch to be sketching those picturesque cottages," said Larry. "I have a red ochre just the colour of those sloping roofs."

"How do they keep them so clean?" Dave wanted to know.

"Well for one thing there's hardly any industry, and then the Dutch people are very keen on smoke abatement—they

use a lot of smokeless fuel—as we are doing now of course.”

Uncle Ben expressed approval at their powers of observation. “Always keep your eyes and ears open,” he advised. “Not just for birds, but for anything of interest. You’ll be amazed how these odd items can be of value when you get back home.”

“Jolly interesting when you think that this coast was once actually joined up to Great Britain,” Dave remarked.

“I refrained from mentioning that,” laughed Uncle Ben, “in case you thought I was trying to push a geography lesson down your throats.” They stood on a high ridge, letting the breeze blow through their hair, and Uncle Ben pointed out lots of places he remembered, some changed beyond recognition, and some hardly changed. “See that fine stretch of woodland almost adjoining the sanctuary? That’s the section Mr. Jansen told us about; that he wants to add to the sanctuary. It’s an odd thing about that bit of land—must be something in the atmosphere—rare birds often migrate there.”

“An’ now it’s covered with barbed wire and enormous ‘keep out’ notices,” said Pete with disgust.

“I’m afraid,” said Uncle Ben, “that it’s covered with even worse things than that. Our friend Frederick is determined to keep everyone out.”

“What do you mean?” they demanded.

“I’m told that not only does he patrol the place with his alsatians, but actually has traps hidden in the grounds.”

Larry shuddered. “Horrible, isn’t it! Especially when you think of those three people in his power.”

Pete flung a pebble far out towards the sea. “If I’d my way,” he said darkly, “I’d plant dandelions over every inch of ground and make him and Willem pick them all as punishment.”

Uncle Ben’s binoculars were still focused on the forbidden land. “Yes by jove, Freek was right! The hut *has* disappeared.”

"What hut? How d'you mean—disappeared?"

"When old Steen was alive he had a little hut over there on the dunes. We bird watchers would go there to shelter, or change films or anything. It was a sort of meeting point at the edge of the wood. I think there was a stretch of marshland over the other side—very treacherous!"

"But how could the hut just disappear?" Pete asked.

"It's probably sunk under the shifting sands. There's no trace of it now—not that it matters; it was only a small tumbledown shack, of no value."

As usual, Dave's mind dwelt on birds. "Did the keeper say that these rare birds had come back to that spot?" he asked.

"Yes. I was going to try to persuade him to let me see them, and p'raps get a few colour shots; but that's out of the question now."

"But how could you get past the barbed wire and dogs and traps?"

Uncle Ben chuckled. "Old Jansen knows his way around. He knows the land better than Frederick or anyone; but of course it would be sheer madness for anyone to go near without him to act as guide—unofficial guide of course, for even he has no legal right there."

Pete was dying to ask more about the buried hut, but Dave pursued his point about the birds. "I can see why it's so important to have that part as a sanctuary, especially if the birds like to go there."

"It would be best from every point of view," said Uncle Ben. "It will be an outrage if he sells to this foreign firm and they ruin the whole sanctuary. Mr. Jansen is quite rightly dismayed at the prospect of the land being used for any kind of experiment. He says if that happens it won't be long before the whole island is cleared of birds."

They climbed along the ridge and walked back round the other side of the island. "There used to be a farm where you could buy home-made cakes and scones and fresh milk."

"Now isn't that miraculous! It's still there. Come on, boys, let's see what they've got."

The boys declared that the milk was the creamiest they had ever tasted, and the thickly buttered scones and home-made biscuits "absolutely super!" "We'll come here again," they promised each other.

"We'll call and see if Freek is home," said Uncle Ben. "I'm anxious to know whether he's going with me or not."

Freek had just got in when they arrived, and eager to tell his news. "I've managed to arrange about the trip, and I'm ready to go to-morrow," he told Uncle Ben.

"Good! We'll be off first thing, then perhaps get back in time to complete a few special pictures."

Suddenly Dave had an idea. "You said Mr. Jansen might take you to see that rare bird—you know—in the forbidden part. Well, just in case you don't get back in time, d'you think he'd take us, just to look, I mean?"

Uncle Ben hesitated. "Well—I don't know—it's a bit tricky. What d'you think, Freek. Would he risk taking the boys?"

"I think he might," Freek smiled. "I'll ask him and see what he says."

The boys listened with rising excitement as Freek explained their request to his father. Dave was of course thinking only about the rare birds, but Pete saw possibilities of great excitement. Even Larry thought it would be jolly good fun, and something to look forward to.

They watched anxiously as a comic, closed-up look spread over Mr. Jansen's wizened face, and it soon became clear that he would quite enjoy defying Uncle Frederick, but that he considered it rather a hazard taking three boys.

"Will you give your word that you'll keep absolutely to the path he follows, and not make any noise or commotion?" Uncle Ben asked.

The boys promised solemnly, and the keeper agreed,

provided they would go at his convenience. He told them where to meet him, late afternoon on the Thursday ; three days hence.

"Don't try photos," Uncle Ben warned. "It'll be too late in the day for good shots, and in any case he'll want to come straight back after you've seen the birds. Also, he'll know the best time to dodge Frederick and his dogs."

Dave was disappointed about the pictures. "Still, it's better than nothing," he realised, and thanked the keeper for his promise.

Uncle Ben was anxious to get back to make his preparations for the journey, and soon they were on their way again, fortified by hot milk and some of Mrs. Jansen's rich currant tea-cakes covered with crunchy sugar and spices. She had also made them promise to come to her if they needed help of any sort while Uncle Ben was away.

As they strolled back, too full to do more than stroll, they were all aware of a deep feeling of satisfaction, supplied to a large extent by the good nourishing food. Larry waxed poetical about the low hills ridged with deepening shades of green and brown, melting into a wilderness of bracken ; and the river, snaking like a deep silver ribbon into the picture out of a patch of pines beyond, now following the valley road towards the village. With the exception of Pete, they all felt in a mood of mellow dreamy tranquillity.

But Pete's mind—ever active—was working overtime, and his cuffs suffered the inevitable penalty for his agitation. But it was not until much later, when they were in fact getting into bed, and Uncle Ben busy packing his things, that Pete said, "D'you know I've got an absolute whizzo plan for Uncle Frederick and Willem."

Larry treated him to an elaborate yawn, but he went on undaunted. "It was Uncle Ben who gave me the idea when he was jawing about that hut buried in the sand."

Dave stopped pulling off his sock and stared. "Well come on, let's have it !"

"You know how we said we'd think up an idea to send a false message to Uncle Frederick?"

"Gosh, yes! I'd almost forgotten about that!"

"Well I hadn't!" said Pete unnecessarily. "I've been thinking lots about it, an' what I figure is this. We send a message to let the old boy think that the documents are hidden away in the hut that's buried in the sand dunes."

Larry, sitting knees up on his bed, chuckled into his knees. "I must say you do get some priceless ideas, Pete. And the thought of Uncle Frederick and Willem digging their way through those mountains of sand dunes appeals to me enormously."

"Me too!" grinned Dave. "It'll take 'em days of sweated labour to find that hut, and they'll have to do their own digging 'cos they won't want to let on to anybody else."

"Roll on to-morrow!" they agreed, "so that we can tell Jan."

CHAPTER X

WILLEM GETS A MESSAGE

NEXT MORNING they were all up early, and Uncle Ben was away almost immediately, which left the boys ample time to do all their shopping and chores before meeting Jan.

Pete was bursting with impatience to spill his idea out to Jan, so it was something of a shock to discover that Jan also had news—very important news! Maryke was with him and they both bubbled over with excitement. Jan waved a letter. "I have de *brief* and Maryke have tell me the Dutch words."

Jan's excitement made him almost incoherent, and out it all came in a gabble—half English, half Dutch—but gradually the sense of it all emerged. Herr Zinkerman had apparently recovered from his long illness and saved up the money for

the journey, and now that he felt he'd made some contact with Johannes's family he was coming to the island to give Jan the message from his grandfather.

"Coming here!" Dave gasped. "Why, Uncle Ben has gone there to meet *him*! They might pass each other en route and never know." His immediate concern was to save time and trouble for Uncle Ben. "I wish I could let him know," he frowned.

"When is this man due to arrive here?" Pete asked.

"He come this day—next day—soon," replied Jan with delightful vagueness.

"And where will he come to? Surely not to the house?" asked Larry.

Jan shook his head vigorously. "No. I have to wait for him at the ferry on the half-hour after six each day till we meet."

"How will you recognise each other?" Dave asked. "After all neither of you has any idea what the other looks like."

But all that had been taken care of. Jan had suggested that they each wear or carry a red handkerchief, then Herr Zinkerman would ask Jan certain questions to establish his identity before handing over the message or whatever it was that he had to pass on.

"That's a jolly good idea," they all applauded, slapping Jan heartily on the back. Maryke looked alarmed until she saw that they were laughing. Jan said something to her in Dutch, and she joined in with a giggle.

There was however a snag. Jan feared that Willem had been listening when he and Maryke were trying to tell their mother the good news. As a result, the work had been so arranged that Jan would not be able to go to the ferry at six-thirty. Frederick had even issued dark threats about sending Jan away for the rest of the season to work on a farm belonging to a distant cousin. Now, Jan looked at the boys as if appealing for help. After all, they *had* promised to help.

"What can we do?" Pete said anxiously.

"Just tell us how we can help," Larry said encouragingly.

Jan's plan was simple. As the old man had no idea what Jan looked like, any boy would do, so long as he carried the red handkerchief, supplied by Maryke. "I would ask my friend Kees," added Jan. "But he helps with the fishing now that he have no father. You will go? Yes—no?" he inquired anxiously.

"Of course we will!" Pete said with emphasis. Mystery! Impersonation! All in the course of doing a good turn! Wow! What a day this was going to be!

"Just a minute though! How do we get this information from Herr Zinkerman? I expect he'll speak German, and we don't know enough of the language to understand him," Dave pointed out.

"How right you are!" Larry sighed. "And it keeps on occurring to me how right old Blinker was when he kept on at us about mastering languages."

"Yes," Dave admitted. "We always looked on his lectures as so much propaganda, to provide him with a job, but it now seems possible that he had our welfare at heart after all."

"Maryke—she come with you," Jan explained. "She knows the German words and can answer all his questions so that he will know we are—how you say—gen—gen—"

"Genuine!" suggested Larry, and they all looked at Maryke with a new respect. Fancy such a small girl—couldn't be more than nine or ten—knowing another language!

"If he comes," Jan continued, "it must be the big secret. No word for Willem to find. He will try to spy, but if he learn the words, all our wishes to make our *moeder* happy will be gone."

The boys assured him that they fully appreciated the gravity of the situation, and that if Willem secured any information it would be over their dead bodies.

"Unless——" announced Pete, who had waited so long to play his trump card, "unless we could use this occasion to let Willem have the false information."

"Why of course! That's a cinch!" cried Dave. "That disposes of Willem, and puts our plan into operation at one stroke. Bravo, Pete!"

They explained Pete's plan to Jan, who in turn explained to Maryke, and a few moments later the five of them were rocking with laughter. Jan and Maryke obviously thought it was a wonderful idea, and each time Maryke pictured Willem and his father digging she went off into fresh peals of laughter.

"Now. Let's get down to working out the details," suggested Larry. "We can't *all* pretend to be Jan, so which of us shall it be?"

"Let Maryke choose," said Dave. "It doesn't matter to us who carries the red hankie, but *she* might have a hunch about it."

Maryke looked at them critically, her pretty head on one side as she made her assessment, and finally her judgment rested on Larry; not because he resembled Jan at all, but perhaps because he looked like the sort of big brother she would like to have.

It was arranged that they would meet Maryke at the harbour gate and she would bring the red hankie.

"What about Willem? How do we dispose of him?" Pete demanded. And without waiting for an answer he outlined a plan he had been hatching. "I suggest that somehow Jan lets Willem overhear him tell Maryke that Herr Zinker-man is coming at six o'clock—not half past."

"Yes, and then what?"

"Maryke will write a message in German about the documents being hidden in the hut—now buried deep in the sand. We can even give precise directions about location. After all, Frederick won't know any more than we do where it is."

"Yes. That's O.K. so far. And we have a fair idea where it is from what Uncle Ben pointed out yesterday. Go on!"

"Then when Willem comes to the harbour gates, one of us—it'd better be you Dave, you do know a few words of German, don't you?"

"Only a few!" Dave protested.

"It'll be enough. All you have to do is ask—let me see—yes, I know—ask if he can tell you where you can find Jan Steen. He's sure to insist that *he's* Jan. Then give him the note. He'll go away so happy we shan't see him for dust."

"By jove, you are a wizard!" Larry grinned. "You ought to get yourself apprenticed to Scotland Yard."

Dave stroked his chin thoughtfully. "I don't know if I can rustle up enough German. What if he asks me something I can't understand?"

"Then you'll just have to bluff," Pete advised. "Maryke will put you wise to a few spare phrases an' you're good at memorising."

Poor Pete! He was the one who had thought up the idea and worked out the details, and now he was the only one with no active part to play. But he seemed quite happy to accept the role of "Master Mind."

Maryke wrote out the message from a page torn out of Larry's sketch pad, and before they departed she wrote out a few phrases for Dave to learn.

"We may have to wait a day or two," Larry reminded him. "The old boy probably won't come to-night, so you'll be all right. Meanwhile," he added, on Dave's behalf, "I think we ought to get on with some of that filming. How far are we off the place you want to be, Dave?"

"About twenty minutes' walk," Dave calculated. "But you and Pete don't have to come unless you want to."

But for some peculiar reason Pete seemed actually to want to go. It was as if—now that his plot was under way—some of the tenseness had left him. "It's as if the air had been let out of my balloon," he told them.

Larry looked at him. "Yes, you do seem to have undergone a sort of metamorphosis, but don't worry—you'll come all right again to-night. Meanwhile, how about finding a nice quiet spot where Dave can take photos, I can sketch, and you, Pete—what about that piece of old driftwood you were transforming into a gull?"

"Oh yes, it's here in the rucksack under the sandwiches."

Dave uttered a sigh of relief, hoping that Pete's mood of acquiescence wouldn't wear out too soon. Pete could be a terrible nuisance at times.

"I don't want to make a howling mess of this film," he said uneasily. "I feel *fairly* confident, but it is jolly important."

"You won't make a mess of it, not with me an' Larry—I mean Larry an' me—to back you up," Pete said solemnly.

"What's your contribution to the effort?" Larry wanted to know. "Making faces at the seagulls or cooing softly to the avocets?"

"'Fraid the only thing either of you can do is to act as decoys, then when I've finished I'll want some help to dismantle the outfit."

When Pete and Larry had fulfilled their function as decoys they found a quiet spot where they could sit and wait for Dave. Larry got busy with his sketching and Pete diligently attacked his piece of wood with his newly sharpened knife.

"Mind you don't chop a bit off your tongue," advised Larry after watching Pete out of the corner of his eye.

"What d'you mean?"

"Well, do you have to have your tongue hanging out like a panting greyhound?"

Pete treated him to a withering look. "I can work better that way. See!"

"Well just hold it while I get the outline for a sketch. It's priceless." Then, as Larry's eye fell on the work in hand.

"I say, Pete, that seagull really is taking shape."

Pete held up his work for approval. "It's a long way off yet, but I think it'll come. I'd like the wings spread out but I'm afraid they'll have to be folded."

"Of course! But I think it'll be a jolly good gull. You've got the outlines quite clearly defined."

Pete's face glowed with pride. Larry knew what he was talking about and he wouldn't hand out compliments unmerited. "It's gotter be good," he said with emphasis. "It's for Uncle Ben. Will you help me with the colours?"

"Sure I will. You keep pegging away. It'll be super. Now I'm stuck with the legs of a heron. Can't remember what angle they're at in flight. Do they hang down limp and straight, or do they trail behind like some of the wild ducks?"

"Haven't a clue! Dave might know."

"I'll have to leave him legless till I find out. I can finish this oyster-catcher instead."

When Dave joined them later he was jubilant. "I was dead lucky with the light. Just enough sun without making it too contrasty. And the birds might have known what I was after. They even seemed to perform for my benefit."

"What did they do?"

"Oh, mostly popping in and out of the nest to feed the young ones. No wonder the poor little mother bird never gets any bigger. She hardly eats anything herself—just a quick nibble now and then—the young 'uns grab everything as soon as it appears. They're never stuffed."

"What about Papa. Does he help?"

"Yes, he comes and goes, and he helps with the little ones. They dart off in turns, and come back cautiously. They don't fly straight into the nest, you know. They land on a twig nearby and have a good look round. If they feel a bit suspicious they pretend to fly off somewhere else before landing on the nest."

"That's what you might call a strategical manoeuvre,"

Pete said grandly. "It's what you do when you're dodging the enemy. It's what we'll be doing to Willem before long," he added with gleeful anticipation.

At five-thirty they made their way towards the ferry where—if Maryke and Jan had played their part—Willem would be waiting.

Dave, exhilarated by his success with the camera, had learned his lines, written out by Maryke.

"Wish we had some sort of disguise," Pete said, eyeing Dave's stocky figure and neatly brushed black hair speculatively. "Don't *think* Willem has seen any of us—not to notice—but if Uncle Frederick comes, he might recognise you from that night when we called at the house."

"We'll just have to risk that," Larry said firmly. "There's nothing we can do at this stage to disguise Dave unless you could make your hair a bit wild, like Pete's."

"My hair will stay just as it is," Dave stated. "I want no complications. And look! By jove—there's our victim—waiting for the dope. Where's my book of words? Now scam, you two, and leave me to put on my act."

Larry and Pete did indeed scam, almost as if they dissolved into thin air; and Dave, smoothing his already well-combed hair, sauntered in the direction of Willem, who stood shiftily gazing this way and that.

As Dave drew near, his distaste deepened. At close quarters Willem's unpleasing face was even worse. Pimples and blackheads decorated his coarse skin, and the crevices of the uneven teeth were filled with particles of half-chewed food.

It so happened that he was the only person standing just there at the moment, so Dave approached him with just the right shade of hesitation and diffidence. "I am looking for a boy named Jan Steen," he said, in the best German he could manage.

Willem's beady eyes gleamed. Flashing a cautious glance round, he said, in a mixture of German and Dutch.

"Ja! I am Jan Steen." He thumped his own chest as if to emphasise the words. "What do you want?"

"I have brought a message from Germany," said Dave. "I have to give the message to Jan Steen."

"What is the message?" demanded Willem. "Give it to me at once."

"Here it is," said Dave, and produced the paper out of his pocket. Willem snatched the paper and tried to read it, but his hand shook with excitement and impatience.

"Is that right?" inquired Dave, scarcely able to conceal a grin at the exultant gleam of triumph in Willem's eyes. "Can you understand the message?"

"Ja! I understand!" nodded Willem, appalled by the enormity of his success. Dave waited for the formal thanks, but none were forthcoming, so he said "good day" and walked off towards the ferry. Willem also made off in the opposite direction, gathering speed until he was out of sight.

Dave doubled up with laughter as the other two joined him. "Oh-oh-oh what a sucker he is! And did he lap it up! Oh-oh I shall burst my sides!"

When the laughter had subsided Larry said, "Anyhow, that should keep them both busy and out of mischief for some little time. Hope they enjoy the digging!"

"Serves him right for taking messages under false pretences," Pete said, with dead-pan face. "It just shows what mean tricks some folks will stoop to."

They were joined very soon by Maryke, who greeted them, "*Goeden Avond* Larry, *Goeden Avond* David, *Goeden Avond* Pete." And Pete went fiery red as he recalled how she had said—a day or two ago—that she would always remember Pete because he reminded her of her plaits; not so much because he had grabbed them, but because they had some resemblance to his rather sticky out ears. But now, her all-embracing smile ironed out his embarrassment as she shook hands with them in turn. "*Jan vertelt Herr Zinkerman come*

dezen avond," she said, which they took to mean, "Jan thinks he will come to-night."

Maryke presented Larry with the red hankie, which he placed prominently in his top pocket. The ferry was almost due now, and people were coming and going ; some strolling, some hurrying, and some on bicycles ; but with the exception of one or two boatmen leaning against the wall they were a moving body of people, especially as the ferry began to unload another cargo of goods and passengers.

Suddenly Dave, who stood a little way apart with Pete, had a pang of misgiving. " I say, Pete, don't you think things are working out just a bit too easy to be true. I have a feeling somehow that we're up against more than we bargained for in this caper."

Pete bit back the words, " Getting cold feet, eh ! " and said instead, " Like what ? " Already he felt some infection from Dave's solemn mood.

" I've been thinking about the message we gave to Willem. What if it proves to be the *right* message after all—and we've handed it to them on a plate ! "

Pete scratched his head uncomfortably. " Yes, I see what you mean, Dave. It *would* be the most likely place for him to hide anything. Gosh, if we've gone an' done that, I'll——"

Dave grabbed his arm. " Sh ! There he is, wearing the red hankie, like Jan said. Look ! " Dave's voice vibrated with excitement. " Maryke and Larry have spotted him and they're going to meet him."

CHAPTER XI

THE MESSAGE DEEPENS THE MYSTERY

THE OLD MAN was trying to push past a knot of people. He was a tired looking little man with wispy grey hair and yellow wrinkled face, and was evidently rather short-sighted for he peered around without seeing Larry and his red hankie.

But Larry moved towards him with a friendly smile, Maryke trotting confidently at his side. It was Maryke who spoke to him, in German of course, and he appeared to accept her explanation. She introduced Larry, then beckoned to Pete and Dave, who were introduced rather awkwardly.

It was an odd situation. One man who understood German. One girl who understood Dutch and some German, and three boys who understood very little of either. Indeed, it occurred to Dave that they were almost superfluous, except of course to protect Maryke in case of trouble.

Dave, utilising his few German words, invited Herr Zinkerman to have a meal while they talked. The old man beamed, accepting only a cup of coffee, as he had eaten a meal on the train, and wanted to get away as soon as possible, to visit his married daughter in Amsterdam.

He looked critically at Maryke, telling her he could see some resemblance to her grandfather. "A very fine man," he told her, adding, "I hope that all his grandchildren are as good and fine as he was."

The boys waited anxiously for him to pass on the message, but the old man sipped his coffee, talking to Maryke and smiling occasionally at the others. His shrewd eyes took in every detail of Maryke, and he asked her a number of

apparently irrelevant questions, all building up, nevertheless, to ensure that she was really speaking the truth.

At last, quite satisfied with her identity, he gave her the message. It came, after all, as rather an anticlimax; spoken in German, and written down by Maryke—first in German then in Dutch. The paper was handed to the boys to take care of until such time as Jan could meet them and translate into English.

"Pretty frustrating!" they all agreed. And even Pete wished fervently that he knew some other language besides his own. They walked back with him to the quay-side, and stood watching for a while as the ferry moved away towards the mainland. The old man waved his red hankie and Larry waved back, then handed it to Maryke, who looked very serious and thoughtful.

"Wonder what the old boy told her?" they said to each other. There was the long awaited secret, burning a hole in Dave's pocket; yet not one word could they understand. Nor did Maryke give any intimation of how much she understood. There was no elation or triumph in her manner, just the same look of puzzled bewilderment that settled on her face when she first heard the message.

"We'll just have to hold our steam till we see Jan. By the way, when *do* we see Jan?" they asked.

At the mention of Jan, Maryke suddenly remembered that she had a note in her pocket from him. She waited while they pored over the paper. "To-morrow morning, ten o'clock at same place. Can you come?"

"Yes, yes of course we'll be there," Pete said eagerly. And as Maryke waited for a reply, Dave said, "Let's scribble a note back."

He extracted a pencil stump out of his pocket. "What shall I put? Will 'O.K.' be all right?"

"'Course it won't! Jan won't know what O.K. means." But to their astonishment Maryke grinned. "O.K.!" she said. "Ja—O.K.!"

They laughed, and Dave scribbled, "We will be there." on the back of Jan's note, which Maryke folded the other way round and popped back into her pocket. She went to collect her bicycle from a shed nearby, and a moment later she was riding away, calling "O.K. ! *Tot ziens !*" her plaits waving and bouncing behind her like yellow tongues of flame.

When she was out of sight Dave said, "Come on, we'd better get back to the shack. We've got to make our own supper to-night and see to the stove and everything."

Freedom is of course a relative term, as the boys discovered very quickly. It might be expected that because there was no authority at hand they would stay out very late at night, but they were in fact in bed earlier than usual. And next morning Dave said, "You know, it's a funny thing. When Uncle Ben went off yesterday we all felt grand and free—as if we could do what we jolly well liked all the time. I don't mean of course that Uncle Ben is strict or anything."

"Gosh, no ! He's about the unstrictest uncle there ever was," declared Pete ungrammatically.

"But now we are free," pursued Dave. "I somehow don't feel as free as I thought I would—if you know what I mean."

"Meaning that we now have more responsibility," nodded Larry.

"Exactly ! Mind you, not that I object to responsibility. It's a jolly good thing, and we ought to have more of it ; but it does make you have a bit more respect for those who have it all the time."

"I suspect there's a moral lurking somewhere," grinned Pete. "I remember old Stinker Bellamy saying something on those lines when he was deputising as head boy."

Nevertheless, despite the added responsibility they arrived punctually to meet Jan, pots washed, crumbs swept up and shopping done. Jan came hurrying, a little late, very anxious to share the mystery of the message with them.

"Maryke tell me the words, and I have translated into English," he told them. "But it will be best if I see the words Maryke write down. There is much I do not understand in all the message."

Dave produced the paper and Jan looked eagerly to see if it made things more clear. The others watched him tensely but he shook his head. "Tell us in English," Pete urged. "Maybe we can help to figure it out."

"*Ja!* I tell you," nodded Jan, showing them his written translation.

Dave read the words aloud. "Protected by earth and water, in the part chosen by the exclusive ones." Larry and Pete listened with bated breath as he continued. "Anchored to the Ancient One that reaches above and below."

"Is that all?" they asked bleakly.

"That is all," Jan admitted, looking anxiously from one to the other, hoping for some solution that he had overlooked.

"Doesn't convey much to me," murmured Larry. "Are you sure you've got the correct translation, Jan?"

"*Ja*, correct translate," Jan affirmed, nodding emphatically.

"Righto! We'll take your word for it, but how on earth can a set of documents or papers be protected *by* earth and water? D'you think it ought to be 'protected *from* earth and water'?" Dave asked. "It might make more sense that way."

"Not protected *from*, protected *by*," insisted Jan. "I have ask my friend Kees. He know more English words than me."

"I wonder!" muttered Pete. "I'm sure if I were Dutch I wouldn't know the difference between a from and a by. Ha-ha-ha, that's double Dutch if you like."

"Let's try the next bit," suggested Dave. "Anchored! Surely that suggests that it's *in* the water."

"Could it be protected *by* earth—in water? Oh, gosh, no! That would be just mud."

"Have *you* any idea what it all means, Jan?" Larry asked. But Jan could offer no solution and was just as mystified as they were.

"Well we've got one thing to be thankful for," said Pete. "It doesn't seem possible that the message we gave to Willem could be the right one. That's a relief anyhow."

"Yes of course! We must tell Jan about the escapade with Willem."

Jan listened eagerly as they told of their encounter with Willem, his face alight with amused understanding. "*Ja!* I know. He and Uncle Frederick talk all time of the digging, and this morning Uncle Frederick he buy big new spades."

"Gosh! That's priceless!" exclaimed Larry. "What about going up on that hill again this evening where we can watch?"

"Yes, we'll do that," Dave agreed. And when they told Jan what they planned to do, he said he and Maryke would try to join them.

The idea won unanimous approval. "That gives us a bit more time to think about those words," said Pete.

"It also gives us a breathing space to do some photography and sketching," added Larry with a knowing wink at Dave, who was already getting anxious about his pictures.

Later, while Dave got himself tucked away inside the hide-tent, Pete, sitting some distance away with Larry, applied himself again to the mysterious words. He repeated them experimentally, with altered accents and punctuations. "Protected by earth and water. Anchored to the Ancient One that reaches above and below! This Ancient One ought to give us a bit of a clue. Sounds as if it might be some sort of monument. But what's this above and below business? Above what?"

Larry carefully filled in the shading on his wing tip. "Could be above and below ground—or above and below water. Or of course it could be symbolical."

"Now I'm not a clever bloke, but I s'pose I oughter know

just what symbolical means," Pete said with heavy sarcasm.

Larry tried to explain. "It's a word—or a thing—that represents something else."

"Clear as mud! Unless you mean the way a monument represents something."

"Yes, that's right! Like bravery, goodness, peace—or—oh, crumbs! Aren't you getting me involved?"

"There might be something in this monument idea," Pete said, in what Larry recognised as his terrier tone. "A monument could be ancient. The mystery of the Ancient Monument—eh?"

"I think Dave had a point about that 'from' versus 'by'," Larry admitted. "I don't see how anything can be protected by earth and water. 'Spect it got mixed up with all the translating."

Pete wrestled with his problem till he felt his brain was on fire; then, realising that he could get no further, became aware of an urgent need for activity. He contemplated having a scrap with Larry but failed to provoke him sufficiently, so finally took himself off. There was a small inlet beyond that ridge of sand—nice and secluded—just the spot for a swim.

Pete flung off his clothes and ran into the water, regardless either of danger or propriety. He jumped and splashed, half-swimming half-paddling in the shallow water; then, his adventurous spirit overriding his caution, he pushed his way through the water round the little headland to the other part of the island.

Pete was away a long time; so long that Larry grew uneasy. It was in fact long past lunch time, and although you could expect Dave to forget about lunch when he was busy with his birds, you didn't expect Pete to forget. Where *was* the little blighter?

Larry opened the rucksack and nibbled a sandwich. Presently Dave joined him and they both ate a sandwich. Still Pete had not returned.

"We don't want to shout," Dave said uneasily. "We're not supposed to make any commotion that might disturb the birds. Which way did he go?"

"He ran off that way," replied Larry, and strode off to look. Before he reached the ridge of sand however, he spied Pete's red mop of hair, now lank and bedraggled.

Larry stopped and stared. Never—in all the time he'd known Pete—had he seen him look like that. His eyes, usually bright and alert, now stared out wildly and he seemed to stagger as he ran towards them.

"Come quick, Dave! Here's Pete—and he looks ghastly. Something awful must have happened."

"He's been in the water," Dave said with some irritation. "Look at his hair! And he's only half dressed."

"Don't say anything just now!" Larry advised as Pete drew near. "He's obviously all in—or had a shock or something. What's the matter, Pete old man? Been for a swim?"

Pete nodded. He tried to speak but his teeth chattered, so without further ado the boys picked him up and carried him to a warm sheltered spot.

"I believe there's a piece of old towel in the bottom of the rucksack," Dave said. "I'll get it, then we can give him a rub down."

They applied the towel to Pete's anatomy, and gradually the shivering stopped and the blue pallor faded. "Sorry we haven't a hot drink," Dave apologised. "But a snack won't do any harm. Have a munch of this."

Pete slowly ate the sandwich and his composure returned, but he made no attempt to explain his escapade. "What happened? Did you swim out too far?" Dave asked.

Pete nodded, but volunteered nothing further.

"He'll tell us when he's ready," Larry said quietly, and to give Pete a chance to recover, he began asking Dave about the birds.

Pete remained subdued and quiet all afternoon, and

presently, while Larry and Dave went on with their work, he put his head down on the grass and closed his eyes.

Larry kept one eye on the inert figure, noting how every now and then Pete's body gave a violent twitch, as if in sudden agony or with sudden recollection or shock. "Poor old Pete! Must have something on his mind. Never known him like this before!" But Larry recognised that it would be futile to force an explanation.

At the appointed time they met Maryke and Jan up on the hill overlooking all the Lowland. There was no sign of Frederick or Willem in the place where the boys expected them to be digging, so they sat down to admire the view and to discuss the message.

Larry explained to Jan about Pete's idea of an Ancient Monument, but neither he nor Maryke knew of any such monument. Then quite suddenly Maryke's face lit up and her arms waved excitedly. The boys could make no sense out of the gabble which followed, but Jan repeated some of the words, and seemed quite impressed. "*Kastan-je-boom!*"

Maryke nodded with excitement, adding, "*Beuke-boom! Eikenboom!*"

"*Ja-ja!*" agreed Jan. Then to the others, "Maryke, she think that the Ancient One could be one of the large trees. The horse-chestnut tree or the oak tree. The branches go up and the roots go down."

"By jove, that's an inspiration!" cried Pete, with the first sign of returning enthusiasm.

"Might be hidden inside the trunk of an old tree," said Dave thoughtfully.

"In which case," added Larry, "It would be protected from the earth and water. Don't quite get the anchor part, but that's probably another mistake in translation."

"Yes, of course!" Dave admitted. "But what a colossal job, searching every tree on the island!"

"Not the whole island," Larry pointed out. "Remember the other bit of the message. Something about the part chosen by the exclusive ones. That must surely be the sanctuary."

"Not the gull sanctuary at any rate," growled Pete. "Nobody would call that exclusive."

"No. But it gives us some idea where *not* to look," said Larry. "And who knows! We may strike lucky."

"What we need," said Dave, who was secretly dismayed at the enormous task confronting them, "is some method. We'll have to organise ourselves so that we cover all the ground without doing any part twice over."

Larry volunteered to draw up a plan. "We can start right away," he said optimistically. "We can leave you in the tent, Dave, and Pete and I will scour all that area first."

They explained simply to Jan, who had already grasped much of what they said. "I will go into the part that belong to Uncle Frederick," he said. "I have knowledge of the trees and paths."

To their astonishment Pete burst out, "No—no! He mustn't go. Nobody must go near that place again." All his wild panic returned for a moment; then, as if recalling something dreadful he shuddered violently.

"What happened when you swam out there," Larry asked quietly. "You'll have to tell us, Pete. It might as well be now."

Pete nodded. "Yes, I'll tell you now. I swam round that lump of land—you know—the one like an enormous knob. An' then I saw that just across the water from there was part of that private land, you know, the part covered with barbed wire."

"And of course you couldn't resist sticking your neck out?" said Dave reproachfully.

"Yes, I stuck my silly neck out. An' I can tell you I jolly well wish I hadn't! I swam out, an' paddled across the

sand an' then I saw that there was barbed wire round the coast part as well."

"And you crawled up and tried to squeeze through?" suggested Larry.

"Well—sort of— I just wanted to see what there was. I went as quietly as a mouse. Then all of a sudden there was a great snarling dog coming at me from the other side, one of those alsatians you know! Gosh, was I scared!" Pete shuddered again. "If that hound had got me I'd have been torn to shreds."

"But it didn't get you of course!"

"I was terrified it might leap over the barbed wire and come at me, so I turned and ran back to the water. Then something awful happened. The snarl changed into a horrible howl—like nothing I've ever heard in my life. I'm surprised you didn't hear it all over the island."

Larry and Dave looked startled. "I did hear it, now you mention it. Couldn't make out what it was."

"So did I, but go on Pete."

"For a few seconds I didn't know whether to run away or turn back, but as the dog didn't seem to be following me I crept back to look." Pete covered his face with his hands. "It was frightful! The dog's front legs were caught in a terrible steel trap."

At this point, Jan, who had understood most of the story, turned to put Maryke into the picture. Then Pete went on, "For one petrified minute I wondered whether to try to get through the barbed wire an' get him loose; but just then I heard *him* coming."

"Who? Frederick?"

"Yes. I did a double scam. But I was only half-way across the sand when I heard a shotgun being fired. I thought he was firing at me so I lay down flat on the sand. Then all at once the howling stopped, an' I knew it was the dog he'd shot. So you see why I don't think anybody oughter go near there," Pete concluded. "They could be torn to

bits by the dogs or caught in a steel trap or even shot by Uncle Frederick."

"Well, I must say it's a bit shattering," murmured Larry. But to their astonishment Jan appeared quite unperturbed. "I know about the dangers," he told them. "But I go to-morrow. The dogs—they no hurt me, and I know the way of the traps."

"And Uncle Frederick?"

"I go when he sleep after his big dinner," Jan grinned. Then suddenly pointing out over the dunes he added gleefully. "There! They come for the digging."

The others peered out through the binoculars, and for the next half hour had the grim satisfaction of seeing Uncle Frederick and Willem hard at work with their new spades. The sinister figures silhouetted darkly against the sinking sun, carefully measured the spot which had been indicated in the note. "Ten metres north of the cabin. Deep down in the ground!" So first they'd have to find the cabin. It would take them quite a time.

It was no easy job digging just there, for as fast as they dug, the hole filled up with soft sand.

"Anyhow they'll get tired before we do," Pete chuckled. And the prophecy was echoed by the others as they once more outlined their plans for the morrow.

CHAPTER XII

JAN DISAPPEARS

THE FOLLOWING DAY there was great activity at the cottage as Pete noisily filled the kettle, Dave chopped the firewood and Larry made the porridge; the eggs, it was felt, could take care of themselves.

Conversation for the time being was purely domestic. "I'll make the coffee. Have we enough bread for brekker? Better check the larder before we go out. Don't want to run short of anything!"

Breakfast over, instead of all doing everything together, Dave did the shopping, Pete washed the pots and Larry tidied up. "Better keep things in order just in case Mrs. Jansen takes it into her head to come and supervise."

As soon as Dave returned with the groceries they set off for the sanctuary. As arranged, Dave continued with the photos while Pete and Larry began to search. "We need only look round the big old trees," said Larry, "so it won't be such a gigantic task as it seemed at first. But we really could do with a map to mark off the areas we've covered. I'm not sure how accurate my plan is."

Pete would cheerfully have dispensed with maps or plans, relying on memory, luck or chance. Already he had climbed two trees, and wherever there was a likely looking fork or thick branch where something might be concealed, up he scrambled while Larry stood on guard.

Sharp twigs scratched his hands and knees, and the tree dust filled his hair and eyes, but never for one moment did his enthusiasm wilt. He seemed to have made a complete recovery from his escapade, and now talked boldly of helping Jan to search in the danger zone.

"The best thing we can do," stated Larry, as a shower of bark splinters and dead leaves shuttered down, "is to scour this area thoroughly: then if we don't have any luck we can—— Hi Pete, watch out! You're making a jolly old commotion up there. If you aren't careful you'll have the birds setting up their warning cries, you know, like Uncle Ben told us."

"Crikey yes!" Pete agreed, thudding down into the grass and foliage. "And the last thing we want is the keeper coming to investigate. He might turn us out and forbid us to come again."

"Which reminds me," said Larry. "Haven't we a date with Mr. Jansen later on to-day?"

"Gosh yes! Wonder if Dave's remembered about it.

"Oh I expect so! What about this whopping oak tree? It seems all twisted and gnarled."

But the oak revealed no secret documents, and though they worked with continual zeal, searching all the trees with fat trunks and forked branches, they discovered exactly nothing.

But at lunch time when they met Dave he was in high spirits. "Couldn't have been timed better," he glowed. "The old ones were actually teaching the young to fly. I wish you could have seen them."

"Glad you scored a winner," they told him. "And we *will* be able to see the film when we get back," Pete added, his mouth full of cake.

"That's if they turn out all right," said Dave with some anxiety. "I got some tremendous shots," he said, and tried to describe the antics of the young birds.

"By the way," said Larry. "Did you remember about our appointment with Mr. Jansen?"

"Oh, yes, I have that lined up," Dave assured them. "But——" he hesitated with a worried frown. "I'd like to help in the search this afternoon, but I really ought to get some more pictures while it's all so favourable. You see——"

Larry and Pete interrupted to tell him in no uncertain terms that he would be quite useless in the tree search; in fact he'd quite positively be a hindrance.

"O.K." laughed Dave. "I can take a hint. It's a swell chance to get on with the pictures. It's amazing what you can crowd into a couple of hours with all these birds around."

As soon as their appetites were satisfied, Pete and Larry mapped out their next stage, and Dave took himself off with the cameras.

By teatime Pete and Larry were no nearer, except that they both felt extremely grubby, and Pete declared he hadn't a square inch that wasn't scratched or bruised. "It's all in a good cause, thank goodness," he said cheerfully. "How's the photo lark, Dave?"

"Absolutely spanking top-hole!" replied Dave amiably. "If all I've taken turn out well, Uncle Ben need have no regrets about going to Germany. Wonder if he's still searching for old man Zinkerman?"

Suddenly he realised that they hadn't left much time. "What d'you say if we make for that farm for tea? It's not far from where we have to meet the keeper."

"Cheers!" said Pete. "I'm famished."

"Cheers!" added Larry. "I'm ditto."

And as Pete remarked later, it was a good job they did stoke up at the farm, for the trek with Mr. Jansen was long and strenuous.

As he led them past the edge of the sanctuary and over the dunes and sandy scrub, their conversation was restricted to grins and grimaces and gestures, with an occasional "*Ja*" or "*Na*" as required.

On one side of the path a wooded slope lay thick with bracken, and on the other side a few linden trees dotted the landscape. Presently they moved away from the pasture land towards where the low walls staggered outwards, to merge with the knotty hedges of the uncultivated stretches. On the crest of a dune the keeper pointed out a nest. "*Scholekster*," he informed them.

"It's an oyster-catcher, isn't it?" Dave stammered, confused by the Dutch word.

"*Ja*! Oyster-catcher! *Scholekster*!" grinned the keeper, and the boys repeated both words to show that they understood.

"Methinks he's taking us the longest way round," complained Pete, whose legs ached with so much tree climbing. But there was more climbing in store. With remarkable

agility the old man clambered over three walls then jumped a stream. After that the ground became sticky, with a hint of bogland. The boys floundered on, keeping close to the keeper, who seemed quite oblivious of the ground beneath him. Sand or pine needles, tangled undergrowth or swamp, on he plodded with grim determination towards his goal.

Every now and then he looked round cautiously, and once he signalled for them to lie low for a few minutes. They obeyed promptly, realising what might be in store—both for themselves and the keeper—if they were caught. The last thing they wanted was to bring trouble for Mr. Jansen, when he was making so much effort to show them this rare bird.

"*I wish* we'd been able to come when the light was good," Dave said regretfully. "Even if we considered coming again, we'd never find the way." And as they crossed a stagnant ditch overgrown with weeds and pushed their way through a mass of tangled undergrowth, Larry and Pete had to admit that it would indeed be tricky.

When at last they reached the nest it was well concealed among the tussocks of harsh grass and Mr. Jansen displayed it to them as proudly as though it were a treasure all his own.

The parent birds flew off at their approach, and the male bird perched on a low bush trying to divert their attention from the nest.

"Boy! Look at that!" whispered Dave, kneeling. The others peered over his shoulder at the two tiny chicks, all beak and fluff, gaping up at them.

"Two out," said Larry, staring down at three speckled eggs. "And more to come. Quite a family this!"

"My! My! Couldn't I get some unique pictures here," said Dave. "Those greeny-blue under-feathers now—they'd show up a treat!"

"Well!" said Pete. "Why not?"

Dave shook his head. "Not a ghost of a chance! We could never find this spot again."

As they stood looking down into the nest the parent birds were quite frantic for the safety of their young. "Would it be any use trying to draw a rough sketch of the route," Larry suggested as they moved away.

Before Dave had time to reply, Pete, whose agile mind had been working full steam, said, "Got anything to tear up?"

"Tear up? What ever for? You can't start littering the landscape with bits of——"

"Shut up, you ass!" Pete hissed. The wheels of ingenuity were rattling round fast. "I must have something to tear into strips. Gimme that toffee bag. I've got an idea."

"As a matter of interest, is the idea in its incubating stage or is it ready for hatching out?"

"If you must know, it's out in full feather. An' you'll appreciate my highly resourceful mind before you're much older, me boy!"

"Well, quit ragging and tell us what you want the paper for. Oh, gosh! Of course!" Light dawned and Dave beamed his approval. "Paper chase! Is that the idea?"

Pete nodded modestly as they handed out compliments, meanwhile fishing around for scraps of paper to tear into bits. "Jolly fine wheeze! It ought to do the trick! Here's part of an old catalogue. It's all yours!"

"Goodo!"

"And here's a page of notes I've copied elsewhere. But don't let the old boy see what we're up to."

"Might be best if Pete lags behind and leaves a bit at each strategic point on the route. We'll try to cover his activities so that the keeper won't spot him."

And on the way back, if the keeper noticed anything he gave no sign. He paused once or twice to point out various birds in flight, and the boys said "Ja" with an appreciative smile.

He left them at the point where they had met, and they

thanked him and waved good-bye. "D'you think we'll be able to find our way back to-morrow morning?" Dave asked eagerly.

"Sure! I've planted bits of paper at every point where we might have been in doubt."

"And now," said Larry, peering through the binoculars at a church clock in the distance. "Isn't it time we moved up towards the hill to watch operation dig-dig!"

"Gosh, yes! We promised to meet Jan and Maryke. They'll most likely be waiting for us."

They were not there however, so they sat down to rest. "Wonder if they've been and gone? It's later than we said."

"Let's hang on a while," said Larry. "They might have been delayed."

"Not much we *can* do, except wait," yawned Pete, who was by this time so tired he could have dropped off to sleep on the spot. But he was jolted out of his drowsy mood by an exultant exclamation from Dave, who had his binoculars focused on the spot where the papers were supposed to be hidden. "They're at it again! Digging like maniacs. Go it, little Willie! Dig on! Do look, boys. It's absolutely super!"

Pete grabbed the glasses and goggled. If reward were required for his efforts and weariness, there it was! Frederick and Willem slaving away harder than any farm labourer or road mender—and all to no purpose!

"Serves 'em jolly well right. Does your eyes good to see that fat greedy herring gobbler wielding that spade. Gosh! I bet they wish they could make somebody else do all this spade pushing."

They were all chuckling and grinning when a small figure came hurrying up the path towards them. "That looks like Maryke! Surely it is Maryke—but where's Jan?" they asked each other.

As Maryke drew near they saw that she was obviously in great distress. Her hair, usually neat and tidy, sprouted out in

unruly strands and her eyes were red with weeping. Even now the tears welled up as she stopped to speak to them.

"What is the matter?" they asked. "Where is Jan?"

"Please help Maryke?" she implored. "*Jan verdwignen.*"

They stared at her apprehensively, realising that something was obviously amiss. "She seems to be trying to tell us that Jan's in trouble and wants our assistance," Larry suggested.

"We will help you if we can," Dave said, emphasising his words by gestures.

Maryke held out her hands appealingly; gabbling in Dutch. She beckoned, turning back, which seemed to indicate that she wished them to follow her.

"Come on, let's see what she wants us to do," Dave said, jumping up.

She smiled through her tears as they began to follow her down the hill. "That's evidently what she wants," Pete said, intrigued by this new turn of events. "P'raps she'll take us to Jan."

But Maryke did not take them to Jan. Instead, she led them to the house of Mrs. Van Dongen. The boys waited, mystified, while she knocked on the door. A small panel slid back and the large face of Mrs. Van Dongen stared out at them. Maryke gabbled to her urgently in Dutch, and she opened the door, meanwhile calling for Kees to join them.

Maryke made some attempt to introduce the boys to each other, speaking their names. "Dave, Larry, Pete and Kees," a tall fair-haired boy, well built, almost like a sturdier edition of Larry.

Maryke talked to Kees and Mrs. Van Dongen as the boys followed them inside the house; as she talked the tears flowed freely and when she stopped it was not because she had finished talking but because she was sobbing.

Mrs. Van Dongen drew the girl into her plump arms, murmuring soothing words, while Kees turned a serious face to the English boys.

"I will try to inform you," he said, in reasonably good English. "Maryke have tell me the bad news that Jan have been sent away."

"Sent away? Where to? And for goodness' sake why?" they exclaimed in dismay.

"Maryke tell me that Uncle Frederick have sent Jan away to the mainland—many miles away near the Dutch-German border, to a farmer who owns large potato fields. He say Jan eat too much and must work hard in the potato fields, until school time begin again."

"But—that's outrageous!" Pete stormed. "That fat lazy lout Willem eats his head off. Oh, but what's the use?"

"It's my opinion," said Dave, "that there's more in this than meets the eye. Wonder if by any chance Frederick got wind of what Jan set out to do—you know—searching in his territory?"

"Whatever the reason, it's mighty serious," added Larry.

Meanwhile Maryke looked at them beseechingly. "You help?" she said between sobs.

"She wish to know if you will help. Jan say you are his friends," Kees told them.

"We most certainly will! In any way we can," Dave assured them quickly. "This really does complicate matters, but tell Maryke she can count on us."

"Sure—sure!" echoed the others. "You bet!"

"But what *can* we do?" they murmured bleakly to each other. "Except go on searching—everywhere."

CHAPTER XIII

" ANCHORED TO THE ANCIENT ONE "

" THE SCOUNDREL ! " exclaimed Pete, as they made their way back to the cottage. " I know what I'd like to do with him an' his cowardly son," he added with a dark frown, referring of course to Frederick and Willem.

" Wouldn't we all ! " growled Dave. " But a fat lot of good that would do Jan."

" I'd never have gone," Pete insisted. " I'd have told him straight I would—in fact I'd——"

" You'd have done no such thing, Pete, not if you had an invalid mother and a young sister depending on you," said Larry. " He's the big boss, y'know ! "

" Of course that does make a difference," Pete admitted. " But what a situation ! This means we won't see Jan again. He can't possibly get back before we're gone."

" Then we've got to get busy covering every inch of that estate, even if it's swarming with dogs and traps," Larry said firmly.

Before leaving Mrs. Van Dongen's house they had discussed the problem in all seriousness, telling Kees what their plans were for the next day, and Kees had promised to bring Maryke along to their house the following evening, explaining that he would have no free time until then, but he would arrange to join them later in the search.

It was agreed that next morning they would retrace their tracks ; then Larry and Pete would search every tree in the area, leaving Dave free to take pictures. And to make things easier for a flying start they prepared breakfast and did a spot of tidying up. " I'd better find a needle and cotton,"

Pete remarked. "I've somehow acquired a gash in my pants."

"I have a great hole in my heel," Larry added. "Have we some wool and a needle? I'm not fussy about the colour." If Mrs. Goodson could have seen Larry closing the gap in his grey socks with great clumsy black stitches she would have been horrified, but it was Larry who had to suffer the hard lump inside his shoe.

Next morning they were up early and off in good time; and although there had been some rain in the night, the pieces of paper were still there, bravely indicating the path they must follow.

"Jolly fine idea this," Dave remarked again, with appreciation. "We'd never have found our way without these papers."

"Shall we leave them for another occasion?" Larry suggested. "They're quite small—they can hardly come under the heading of litter—and it's a mighty tricky place to find."

"We'll leave them to show us the way back," Dave agreed. "But we must remove every scrap of debris before we depart."

"May have to make a few journeys," Pete speculated. "We don't know our way around, an' we'll have to watch out all the time for—you know—those beastly traps."

They all shuddered. "Yes, for the love of mike do watch every step," Dave said with a catch in his breath. "It'd be jolly awkward if one of us got injured."

"Better not wander too far from the path," Larry warned. "We don't know our exact location. There's no landmark to guide us and we're too low down to get a proper view of the island."

"Pity we haven't a compass," Dave said regretfully. "There is a way of guiding yourself by shadows, provided you have a good watch, but it's a bit primitive."

"Oh, we'll get by," Pete said optimistically. "We can count how many times we turn left or right." He stood on

a projecting rock and gazed round. "What we'd better do," he said with a generous sweep of his arm, "is to comb this part, an' then weave our way back here to Dave for sandwiches."

"Suits me," nodded Larry. "And then if Dave's finished his photos we can all set off in another direction."

"Unless of course you've found the papers by that time," Dave grinned.

"Ha-ha! Very funny!"

"What's funny I'd like to know! Surely we do expect to find the jolly old documents. Or are we just climbing all these trees for the good of our health?"

"Not so much noise!" hissed Dave. "I need a quiet peaceful atmosphere for the job in hand. Now scram! And don't show your ugly mugs till dinner time."

"O.K.! Only promise not to scoff all the sandwiches before we get back!"

Dave promised, and the others set forth on their search. The ground rose sharply just ahead of them, and there was no avoiding the climb if they were to search all the trees. "Mind you don't twist your ankle," Pete warned. "It's pretty rough and rocky."

The undergrowth was a tangle of snares; no telling what lay beneath; whether it was dead leaves, twigs, rocks or swamp—or even traps!

Larry acquired for himself a thick tree branch to feel his way with; then as they dipped down again, the ground grew soft and their shoes began to squelch a little with bog water. Just ahead were reed fringes where they could hear the coots clucking to each other. "Nearly as many birds here as in the sanctuary," Larry murmured. "What's that? Have we the binocs. handy?"

"I think it's a black-tailed godwit. It has that long straight bill."

"Yes, and see how the white-barred wings flash in the sun."

"Which reminds me, we've been a bit slack about our notes lately. We ought to try an' catch up."

"I was thinking the same when I spotted a green sand-piper. It's a migrant, isn't it?"

"I believe so. I have an orange-coloured ruff to record. It was a beauty. Then there was another with brown wings and white ruff. We'd better get them all down to-night."

"Now, how about shinning up this massive tree? Looks as if it could conceal all the wealth in the world, including the Crown Jewels."

Pete scrambled up the tree, bruising his knees on some of the knots, but he discovered no documents, so on they plodded from tree to tree, searching and climbing, watching and listening all the time for a sight or sound of danger and collecting showers of dust and dead leaves in their eyes, hair and mouths.

Larry stopped to consult his plan, but Pete kept going. In a little hollow he stopped a moment and surveyed a magnificent linden soaring far above the others. "Could be that!" he thought.

Suddenly he felt the ground give beneath him. He lurched forward and his right leg disappeared beyond the knee into a thick clutching ooze.

He struggled, turned, the slime closed round his thighs. "HELP!" he screamed. "HELP! I'm sinking!"

Larry swung about and ran forward. Holy smoke! With all their caution spent on looking for man-made danger, they had overlooked a more deadly natural peril. There was Pete, floundering up to his waist in bog. "Keep still!" commanded Larry. "Don't wriggle! Here—catch hold of this branch. I'll see if I can get you from this tussock."

"Be careful!" Pete gasped. "Can't do with both of us in this mess. It's horrible! I can feel it sucking me down inch by inch."

Larry looked round quickly, apprehensively, to see how big was the patch of bog. Fortunately Pete was only on the

fringe, but beyond him the marshland stretched like a sinister quaking wilderness.

The greeny-brown slime oozed up around Pete's body, and as he made another effort to clutch the branch Larry held out to him, everything shivered and quivered around him.

"Keep cool!" urged Larry, with an assurance he was far from feeling. "I might be able to reach you from that tussock over there. Wonder how firm it is!"

Larry jumped, and the ground shivered beneath him, but his bulge of grass remained firm. Larry measured his distance, flung himself down flat so that his weight rested on two tussocks. "There!" he gasped. "You should be able to reach it now!"

But alas! There was still a gap of several inches.

Pete squirmed his way through the slime, but every inch he moved nearer to the branch brought the mud two inches higher up his body.

The seconds ticked away relentlessly and Larry heaved himself another few inches nearer to Pete, scarcely daring to breathe in case a sudden slight vibration sent him headlong into the morass.

Heave—squelch! Pete clawed the air in one tremendous burst of energy, and his fingers closed round the end of the branch. Never in all his life had Pete known such a welcome sensation as that tough piece of bark resting securely inside his palm.

He pulled, slowly but surely, nearer to Larry, while the ooze sucked at him like a living thing. "Come on! You'll be O.K.!" Larry said, now with more conviction.

Gradually he managed to ease him out; and then both clambered, half staggering, to a safe spot beyond the reeds. "Phoo!" said Pete faintly. "That was a near thing!"

Then came the job of trying to clean up the mess. "Thanks for saving my life an' all that!" he mumbled, grimacing through a great splodge of mud that had somehow transferred itself to his face.

"The things we do in the name of adventure!" snorted Larry. "Here, let's see if I can scrape some of that filth off your legs."

"Don't suppose my shoes will ever come clean again," Pete said ruefully.

"You're darned lucky to come out at all—shoes or no shoes," Larry reminded him. "Here, try this grass. It's a bit more absorbant."

They sat down on a fallen trunk, wondering what to do and where to go. "Well there's one thing certain," Larry insisted. "We're taking no more risks near that marsh-land."

Pete agreed, trying to ignore the fact that his legs were beginning to tremble. "There are just one or two more trees on this side that we didn't examine. I vote we do them and then go back for eats."

But there was no sign of papers or documents lurking in any of the trees they searched, and by the time they turned their faces back towards their meeting point, Pete was in despair. "I did hope we'd be able to do something to help Jan and Maryke," he said with a growl that expressed all his disappointment and frustration.

Larry said nothing. He also felt dispirited, especially as Jan had been whisked away, and Maryke depended on them so implicitly.

"Hang it all," Pete went on, with a vicious kick at a poor unoffending twig. "We've only got a few days left—an' Jan's gone off to dig spuds or something! What a miserable futile end to all the plans we laid!"

Larry nodded, feeling the weight of hopelessness, and tactfully refrained from reminding Pete that this caper hadn't after all been the main purpose of their holiday.

As they approached the spot where they had left Dave, he was nowhere in sight. "Shall we give him a shout?" Pete whispered.

Larry shook his head. "Better not! Might disturb the birds just at an awkward moment."

"What if *he's* struggling in a bog!"

For a second, Larry looked startled, then he laughed, pointing ahead. "He's not in any bog. There he is, coming round that rock. Looks mighty pleased with himself, I must say!"

"He's no right to look so blooming cheerful!" Pete growled, as Dave came swinging lightly round the lump of rock.

"Any luck?" he asked, unnecessarily.

"Not so much as a toffee paper or a cigarette packet," replied Pete with deep disgust.

"Well we can't all be lucky," Dave grinned. "But you'll be pleased to know that I've had a highly successful morning. Had to chase the little beggars all over the place, but I think I've got some good shots. Marvellous little birds! Hope the markings all show up on the colour films."

Larry congratulated Dave, and tried to sound hearty, but Pete could not throw off his gloom. "Cheer up!" Dave advised. "We've still got this afternoon, and I'll come climbing with you. I've used all the film so I can't take any more pictures."

Then over the sandwiches Pete brightened up a shade, and between them he and Larry told about the mishap in the morass. "Ugh! Horrible stuff! It sucks you down—an' as fast as you try to scramble out you feel yourself being pulled—inch by grisly inch. If Larry hadn't been there an' used his wits, I'd have been well and truly sunk."

"I got no end of a fright," Larry admitted. "And I jolly well nearly panicked. It's not like water, where you can dive in and do a proper rescue."

"There must be quite a bit of bog around here," Dave said seriously. "Nearly got stuck myself. I only missed falling smack into a patch by grabbing the root of a big tree. Which

reminds me," he added. "I saw a funny thing there amongst the roots."

"What sort of funny thing?" Pete's question came as an automatic response, but his voice was flat. He didn't really want to know any more about rare birds or eggs or nests.

"At first it looked like part of the root, and then I saw that it was a sort of thick cord, covered with soil and dried mud, and all mixed up with the root."

"Well—didn't you fish it out to see what it was?"

"No. You see I was after the mother bird. She darted over there by the tree root—and all I could think about was getting the shot."

"And did you get it?" Larry asked.

"Yes. A real spanker! That's how I came to slip—and nearly land in the bog. I was so busy watching the bird I never noticed what there was down below."

"But what about this cord thing tangled up with the roots?" Pete said irritably. "Was it tied to the tree or just thrown there?"

"Oh, it probably just landed there by accident, but we can investigate later if you like."

"I do like," stated Pete. "How do we know it isn't a clue or something?"

"Oh, forget your clues and what-nots for a few minutes. Have another sandwich," Dave invited, cheerfully.

Pete ate his sandwich, but as soon as the meal was over, up he jumped, the trembling in his legs forgotten. "C'mon! Let's investigate that cord. Where is it, Dave?"

"This way," said Dave, leading the way. "But don't be too disappointed if it doesn't——"

"Hi! Steady on!" called Larry. "We want no more catastrophes!"

Dave led them to an enormous oak which seemed to have rooted and grown on a kind of natural shelf where the grass banked steeply, to leave half the roots exposed; or maybe

the earth had fallen away years ago, leaving only the soil held by the roots.

Down below lay the bog, where Dave had nearly fallen in, but this time they approached with caution. "Now, let's see. The bird came in at this angle, and then I—ah! Here it is. Yes, it is cord. Real fisherman's rope. Been soaked in tar by the look of it. Could have been here centuries."

"Look! This end is tied to the tree root. Can't you see how it comes round and under—don't tell me it fell like that by accident!" Pete's fingers, trembling with agitation, pointed to what was certainly a knot—a very secure knot—in the cord.

"Jumping Jupiter! You're right, Pete! Come on, let's get weaving! What about the other end?"

They tried to follow the trend of the cord, but the tree roots had twined themselves round the rope until it seemed to be part of the tree. "The other end seems to go down—why, it must be lost and sunk in the bog down there."

"What if there's something fastened to the other end!" Pete gasped, his heart bumping with excitement and exertion as they pulled. "There is something! There must be or it wouldn't stick like this. Oh, come on. Pull! heave! heave! We've gotter drag it out."

There was a squelching heaving su-u-uck, as the greeny-brown slime relinquished its burden at the other end of the rope. "There is! There's something fastened on the end!" Pete, choking with excitement, almost lost his balance as the rope, suddenly free from the bog, jerked up with its newly acquired force, splattering the sticky wet mud over everyone without fear or favour.

"D-don't g-get t-too excited," Larry stammered, his own excitement mounting to fever pitch. "It's probably only an old boot or something."

It was difficult to see just what emerged until some of the mud and slime had been scraped off. Dave, now white and tense, feverishly fingered the object, and Larry and Pete

stood trembling, sweat pouring down their mud-bespattered faces. "What is it? Oh, for crying out loud!" The agony of suspense was almost unbearable.

The object was enclosed inside the cord, which had been carefully woven and knotted, forming a protective bag, now covered with sticky greasy mud, but Dave's fingers probed until he got the feel of what was inside. "It's something smooth like a long piece of marble. Or else—hold on a minute. Gosh! It could be a *glass bottle*!"

"Then it must be the documents! Ohhhhh! Let's get this filthy muck off. Where's my knife? Must cut the cord."

Pete's hands trembled so violently that he could scarcely unclasp his knife. "Better dip it in that pool over there," Larry urged. "It'll be easier to handle if we swill off the mud."

As the cord and mud fell away, the nature of their discovery became apparent. It was, as Dave had hinted, a large glass bottle, sealed at the top with wax. The glass was not transparent, and in any case it was now too grubby and discoloured to see inside, but it was pretty safe to assume that the bottle contained something of value.

Pete implored them to open it at once, and Dave and Larry looked at each other, their eyes questioning, "Shall we open up now or wait till we get back?"

But the question was never answered, for suddenly, over the horizon, loomed a large bulky figure with a gun, followed by another bulky figure leading an enormous Alsatian.

"Now we're sunk—good an' proper! Here comes the herring gobbler and his precious father," muttered Larry, as the two figures approached menacingly. "And oh, what ghastly luck! They've spotted us!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE SECRET

FOR A FEW horrible seconds the boys stood petrified as a bellow burst from Frederick and the pair bore down on them. Then Pete hissed. "Quick! Let's scatter. Confuse the blighters."

Larry grabbed the bottle. "Pete's right! You look after your camera, Dave, and I'll take this. We'll find our separate ways back to the trail."

Like lightning the three boys dived in different directions, Dave towards the rucksack, Larry trying to hit the trail, and Pete towards the bog!

And almost in the same instant came another roar from Frederick. "*Ach! Stop! Hein!*" Then he turned to Willem and shouted something in Dutch, pointing to the retreating figure of Pete.

Willem, leaving both gun and dog, set off in pursuit of Pete; and Frederick closed in on Dave, now handicapped with camera and tripod.

The obvious thing would have been to send the dog after Larry, but Frederick was apparently loth to risk another dog getting caught in one of the traps.

Now, within five yards of Dave, he waved his gun threateningly, his bloodshot eyes glaring venomously. His hard rough voice called for Dave to stop, and—feeling the hot breath of the Alsatian on his bare legs—Dave realised that he had the choice of stopping or being knocked down by the panting beast.

He stopped, and turned to face Frederick, now purple with rage and exertion, his flabby face glistening with sweat. Dave stood perfectly still while Frederick called off the dog,

who was just about to pounce. Then Frederick grabbed hold of Dave, shaking him roughly. "Vat you do here?" he snarled.

Dave thought quickly. The longer he could stall the big bully, the longer it would leave Larry to make his escape with the bottle. He stared rather stupidly into the large greasy face glaring down at him, and pretended not to understand. Impatiently Frederick gripped Dave with one hand and shook an enormous fist within inches of the boy's face.

Dave did not flinch. Instead he shook himself free, then said boldly, "I am English, and do not understand your language. If you wish to take me to the Police Station I will come quietly, without trouble."

Frederick knew enough English to recognise the word Police, and it was a word he had no liking for. "Na—police!" he shouted, his thick spatulate fingers curling to close round Dave's neck. But Dave, one eye on the Alsatian, ducked adroitly, leaving Frederick grasping the air.

If it weren't for the blooming dog I'd have a bash at legging him up and getting away, he thought. Aloud he said, "Please tell me what you wish to know and let me go."

"You haf trespass, you English brats!" Frederick almost screamed. "You come here to make trouble."

Dave looked offended. "Oh, no! You must be mistaken. I only followed a bird, and wanted to take a picture." He showed Frederick the camera. "I had no thought of doing any harm."

Frederick looked half relieved, half suspicious. "And vat about ze other English brats?"

"The other boys? Oh, they are my friends. They came to watch the birds." Dave produced his binoculars, which Frederick disregarded. His tongue slid over his dry thin lips and his eyes glinted craftily. "You must show me everything in your pockets and in your bag. You might haf steal something—eggs now?"

Dave made a show of reluctance, slowly tipping out the

contents of his pockets and the rucksack. Two rolls of film, a pocket-knife, a little money, a rather grubby handkerchief, half a pencil and an end of rubber, his notebook, where—he realised with dismay—the message from Herr Zinkerman was written, if Frederick chose to look.

But Frederick was becoming impatient with Dave's leisurely pace. "Make haste!" he snarled, fingering the contents Dave had tipped out. "And then get out. If I catch you——"

Suddenly a shriek of terror rent the air, which sounded half human, half animal. The Alsatian's ears shot up, and Frederick stood for a second in startled anger. The cry came again. "Help! Vader! Help!"

A look of thwarted rage filled Frederick's countenance. "Dat is Willem!" he muttered. And calling the dog he went crashing through the wood in the direction of the noise, without another word to Dave, who lost no time in gathering up his odds and ends.

Curious as he was about the shrieks and wails which came echoing through the wood—answered now by shouts from Frederick—Dave was more anxious to know how Pete and Larry had fared. If Willem was in difficulties his Pa could help him; but what about Larry, who had the precious bottle; and Pete, who had a flair for trouble!

He found them both waiting for him at the boundary, and after mutual assurances that everything was intact, Dave said, "Did you hear that frightful shriek? I began to wonder, as I ran back, if Willem had got caught in a trap or something."

Pete chuckled. "Yes, we heard all right! It *was* Willem, and he *is* in a trap; a nice soft sticky one. An' if his Pa hasn't dragged him out he'll be about up to his neck by now."

"How did it happen?" Dave asked with a horrified shudder.

"I just led him on," grinned Pete. "I remembered how

I'd fallen in myself, so I led him right into the trap—taking good care of course to steer clear myself."

Pete was all for opening the precious bottle at once, but Larry said, "No. We're all far too grubby to touch anything."

Pete, admitting the wisdom of waiting, urged, "Come on then, let's get back as quick as we can make it."

"I say, I've just realised," Larry said as they hurried back. "Those words which we thought were a wrong translation were dead right after all. 'Protected by Earth and Water.' The bog *is* earth and water, and it *did* protect."

"Gosh, yes! And it *was* anchored to the tree. We never thought about searching the roots did we?"

"Jan's Granpa must have had a mighty cute sort of brain to think up such a hiding place. I wonder if it was the bird that gave him the idea. You know, going in amongst the tree roots like that!"

"Still, I think he could have made it a lot easier."

"Sure he could! And then the wrong persons would have found it. Of course, Jan's father would have had no difficulty. He'd have known right away where to look."

"Well our next move is to find out just what's inside. By the way, did we pick up our bits of paper?"

"Most of them. Might have missed a few, but we got what we could."

The journey home seemed endless. Pete tried to put on a spurt, but his legs dragged heavily, and as they emerged into the lane they became highly conscious of their grubby state. Hands, legs—and even faces—were smeared with mud; not just plain mud, but mud with exceptional sticking qualities, and bits of twigs and dead leaves lingered in their hair and jerseys as if bearing testimony to the nature of their scramble.

The few people they met stared at them with obvious

curiosity. "You'd think they'd never seen any dirt before!" Pete scowled.

Back at the house the first thing they did was wash their hands—not an inch above the wrists of course—and then set about the bottle.

Ravenous as they were, this task had priority over the all-important job of eating. The bottle was quite an ordinary one, well corked and sealed with wax, which they began to scrape off. "There are certainly some papers inside," Dave assured them, peering through the top.

"Oh, pull 'em out quickly. This is the moment we've waited for!"

"Careful!" warned Larry. "They might be in poor condition. We don't want to tear them."

Gradually they drew out the papers and unrolled them with trembling fingers. Then, as three heads, very close together, pored over the papers, there came a united sigh, like a balloon going down.

"What a sell!" "Blow it, why didn't we realise!" "If only we could read Dutch!"

"Still, it is pretty conclusive," Dave said with a catch in his breath. "Look! Here's the name—Johannes Steen. These *are* the missing documents all right."

Pete, his tiredness forgotten, danced a war-dance round the room, waving everything he could lay hands on. Then in sheer exhaustion he collapsed in a chair. "I'm going to eat till I burst, to celebrate. Ten boiled eggs an' two loaves an'——"

Larry hurled a cushion at him. "You can put the kettle on and get moving. We've still got things to do. Don't forget we have to find some way of getting Jan back."

"We might feel more like planning something else after we've wrapped ourselves round a spot of tea," Dave suggested. "We have eggs and strawberry jam so we shan't starve."

When the tea-things were cleared away they spread out

the papers on the table. They were stained and yellow, but otherwise intact; and it almost seemed as if the papers declared, "Well, so you dug me out! What now?"

"The thing is," said Pete, whose mind always worked in devious ways and intricate patterns. "We have to get these papers to Jan. But first we must make Uncle Frederick *think* he's got them. Maybe if he thinks he's got the document he'll feel safe, an' let Jan come back."

"Yes, by jove you may be right! But how can we create such an illusion?"

"The only way to do that is to produce duplicate copies—which of course is impossible."

"Why is it impossible?" Larry asked, gazing intently at the papers.

"Well, we can't even read the bally stuff."

"For copying, we don't need to," Larry said slowly.

"D'you mean——?"

Larry nodded. "Look. All except two of these papers are written on ordinary paper. We can't copy these with printed headings, but if Frederick got a copy of some of these others he might well think he's got the lot."

"Sure, sure! That's brilliant! An' then we could spill tea on them to look stained like these."

It did occur to them that they *could* have taken the papers to the Jansens, or to Mrs. Van Dongen—or to the police; but nobody pressed the point. It was much more exciting to hoax Frederick again.

There was an assortment of plain writing paper in the desk, and Larry helped himself to a few sheets, remarking, "I'm sure Mr. DeGroot won't mind. It's for a good cause."

"Shall we stain the paper now or after the copying's done?" Pete asked, trying to be helpful.

"After, I think. Then it'll cover up any faults in spelling."

It was generally felt that Larry was best able to do the copying, so the others tiptoed around doing odd jobs while Larry applied himself to pen and paper. The work—copy-

ing letters and symbols they did not understand—needed care and patience that Pete, for one, could not apply.

“What will we do with the papers when they’re finished?” Pete asked.

“Put them back into the bottle and seal them up,” replied Larry.

“An’ then what?” Pete insisted.

“Only one thing *to* do,” said Larry. “Hide them in the spot where Frederick was *supposed* to find them.”

“I say! That’s an absolutely wizard idea! Wow! What a super-duper wind-up to our wonderful plan. Who’s going to plant the jolly old bottle?”

“We’ll all go; or else we’ll draw lots,” insisted Dave. “And don’t let’s forget it’ll be no picnic getting through all that barbed wire.”

Larry said nothing. His face wore a slight frown with the effort of concentration. He had already been thinking hard about the job of planting the bottle, but for the moment he kept his thoughts to himself.

When Maryke and Kees arrived, a little later, the boys announced their discovery, taking great pleasure in watching Maryke’s face as Kees translated the news to her. Maryke was eager to look at the papers and to read them before daring to believe the wonderful news. The boys watched with impatience as they pored over the documents. Gradually the incredulity dissolved, her face brightened, becoming almost radiant; and in her enthusiasm she hugged the three boys, gabbling her thanks and gratitude.

“Please tell us what is in the papers,” they begged.

“Ja! I tell you,” Kees smiled. “The papers say that all the land and property and possessions owned by Josef Steen (Maryke’s grandfather) now belong to his son Johannes or to his family.”

“That’s just how everybody said it ought to be,” exclaimed Pete. “This oughter give Frederick and Willem the right about turn.”

"One more thing," Kees went on. "It say that one part to be use for bird sanctuary for all time."

"That must be the part Frederick has roped off," Dave cried. "Gosh! Uncle Ben will be pleased. So will a lot of other people for that matter."

"Including the keeper!" added Larry.

"But what about Uncle Frederick!" laughed Pete. "Oh, boy! Wouldn't I just love to see his fat flabby face when he learns that the truth is discovered."

Kees and Maryke were still examining the papers, and their excitement mounted as they gabbled together in Dutch. The others watched with growing interest until finally Kees said, "You have find much more than you look for. There will be joyfulness all over this island when it is known."

He explained that some of the other papers told where many of the people had hidden their valuable possessions before leaving the island. Precise instructions were given to all the families—the ones who were left—as to how these valuables could be recovered. They were all concealed in various parts of the land now claimed by Frederick!

"So *that's* why Frederick came back to claim his inheritance! He must have somehow got wind of this. No wonder he took such drastic steps to keep everybody away from the land. He's hoping to find everything for himself in due course."

"So a lot of other people, besides Jan's family will be pleased."

Kees nodded, slightly overcome by all this wonderful revelation. There would even be something for his own family. His mother would be very pleased.

The boys explained to Kees their plan to let Frederick find the bottle with the copies inside. "Only copies of the will, of course," they added hastily. "We figured that if he *thinks* he's got the papers, and maybe destroyed them, he may agree to let Jan come back," they added.

Kees applauded the idea with enthusiasm, but he seemed

dubious about how it was to be achieved. He reminded them about the traps and the dogs—not to mention the barbed wire.

Maryke also thought it would be a good idea. Anything that might bring Jan back would be worth some effort, but she was likewise apprehensive about the danger.

"It will be done," said Larry, putting the final touches to the papers. "Now, where's that cold tea? We're all set for the stains."

While Pete joyfully sprinkled the papers, Dave said to Kees, "We hope you will explain to Maryke that she must not tell one word of all this to anyone—not even to her mother—in case Frederick or Willem overhears."

Kees explained this to Maryke, but instead of accepting the situation, her face clouded and she became distressed. She talked back, almost in tears, and when Kees tried to explain he obviously found it embarrassing. "Maryke say that she cannot bear not to tell her *moeder*. It is the good news she have waited for so long, and Maryke think it will take away the sickness."

Dave bit his lip. "Yes, I can see that, but——!"

Then Kees said with dignity, "I will tell you what to happen. I will tell my *moeder*, and she will finden the way to let Maryke's *moeder* know of the good news."

"That's a jolly good idea," said Larry. "And she's not afraid of Big Bad Wolf Frederick?"

Kees threw back his head and laughed. "My *moeder*—she big lady. She fear no man. She shout loud words at him if he try to stop her doen what she think right."

"That's what he wants! Somebody to stand up to him! Somebody who will stand no nonsense."

"My *moeder*—she no nonsense!" Kees stated.

"Fair enough!" grinned Dave. "So we'll leave it in your hands to do what you think best, without letting Frederick know."

After Kees and Maryke had gone, taking the real docu-

ments with them, came the job of sealing up the bottle. "There's part of an old tallow candle in a drawer with some bits of string and odds and ends," said Pete. "I'll get it."

Dave hammered in the cork, and when it was nicely smeared with melted wax they stood back to admire their handiwork. "Nice work, that!" Dave said approvingly.

"But what about getting it planted?" Pete urged. "Did we decide to draw lots or something?"

Dave looked out of the window. "It's raining hard just now. Shall we wait till it stops?"

"I think," said Larry, with deliberation, "that it might be best to go now—at once. I doubt very much if dear Frederick and Willem will be digging in the rain."

"Not unless Uncle Frederick puts Willem out there to swill off the mud," Pete grinned.

"I say!" Dave's conscience suddenly smote him. "You don't think he'll have sunk? I mean—bad as he is—I wouldn't wish that kind of sticky grave on him."

"Oh, no! His Pa would haul him out all right. But by jingo, I'll bet he's had a nasty fright! Come on now, what are we waiting for? Let's fling on our macs an' get moving."

"Listen," said Larry. "I know it's cheek asking, but—well—the fact is, I want to go and plant these papers. I've a rather special reason for wanting to go."

Pete and Dave stared, nonplussed. "I don't see why we shouldn't all go," Pete said, aggrieved. But Dave, looking keenly at Larry, said, "Are you quite sure that's what you want, Larry?"

Larry nodded. "It's all right! I'm not having heroics or anything. I just want to prove something to myself."

Dave took a deep breath, and when Pete began to protest, he put his hand over Pete's mouth. "We understand, don't we, Pete? But you don't have to prove anything to us you know!"

"Thanks for your faith in me," Larry said gratefully. "But I still need to go."

"If there had been a need to prove anything—to yourself or anyone else," Dave hinted, "I'd have thought that what you did when Pete fell into the bog was pretty conclusive."

"Not really!" Larry said. "That was spontaneous—all done on the spur of the moment—I'd no time to reflect. Anyone would have done *that*."

"Oh well," Dave still kept a restraining hand on Pete, "we'll agree, on condition that Pete and I come with you as far as the barbed wire. Then you can complete Operation Bottle under your own steam."

Larry had no option but to agree, and they quickly made their way to the nearest spot where he would have to get through.

Actually, getting over the barbed wire was not so treacherous. They chose a spot near the post, and after a leg up by Pete and Dave, Larry found it not too difficult jumping down the other side.

A moment later he was moving stealthily on the wrong side of the barbed wire towards the spot where the bottle must be hidden.

"Now I shall know," he muttered to himself. "Now I'll know whether I'm a coward or not!"

CHAPTER XV

OPERATION BOTTLE

AT FIRST, Larry was aware of a wonderful feeling of exhilaration as his feet trod softly on the wet sandy soil. Better coming now, instead of waiting till it was dark; he would at least be able to look out for traps. He knew roughly the direction he must follow, and figured it would take about half an hour each way; twenty minutes if he was lucky.

The air was still. Not even a faint breeze stirred the leaves, and the rain dropped steadily in a slow heavy drizzle, seeping into the earth and sand. A strong pungent smell of wet leaves and wood filled his nostrils, blending with the smell of salt and seaweed from the not far distant sea.

Larry had made Pete and Dave promise to go back, leaving him utterly alone—a stealthy silent figure, moving towards his goal without even a faint shadow for company. His face was wet with mingled rain and perspiration. "Warm work!" he said under his breath, and wished he could shed the dripping raincoat.

Every now and then a small creature darted across his path, startled by his footsteps, and startling him by its fear. He'd be glad when he was out on the duneland, away from the trees and shrubs, where he could imagine a figure lurking behind every clump of bushes. Once, when a low-flying bat circled round and touched his shoulder he imagined in that brief few seconds of shock the heavy hand of Frederick, pointing a gun into his ribs, or being caught in some mysterious snare.

Larry shook himself to remove the cold fingers of horror which crept along his spine. "Don't be such a clot," he told of himself. But the vision of Frederick stayed with him. The huge bulky form with its brutal face confronted him like an evil mask, and once the illusion was so real that his fist shot out, only to crash into thin air.

"Uh! This place gives me the willies! Thank goodness the trees are thinning out. There are the sand dunes! Now—the spot I have to make for is over to the left. Shouldn't be difficult to locate the place where they've been digging; then all I have to do is to plant this precious bottle somewhere handy—about a yard or so down, I think."

The bottle bulged in his pocket, making him feel a shade lop-sided as he walked rather drunkenly over the loose wet sand. "Heavy going, this! Much harder than walking on the grass."

Five minutes later, Larry reached the spot where the digging had been going on, and he could hardly resist a chuckle as he realised the amount of work which had gone into such an upheaval. The spades stood awkwardly, half poised, as if ready for the next load of sand. "Now! Shall I place it near the spade? It's obviously where they——!"

Suddenly his fingers, gripping the bottle, grew tense and stiff. Panic surged into his throat. Footsteps, heavy footsteps, quite close now, came thudding over the sand. From his position, crouched down, half hidden behind a pile of newly dug sand, Larry wondered wildly if he could avoid detection.

He saw a pair of feet and legs—large feet and thick legs—moving remorselessly nearer. Nobody but Frederick could belong to those great striding legs! Larry held his breath, not daring to move a muscle. P'raps he'd move on without——! But with a sickening lurch of fear, he heard the voice—thick—guttural and harsh. "So! I haf catch you English brats!"

A heavy hand descended on Larry's shoulder. It was now or never! Larry sprang up and with all his energy lashed out. The bottle slipped from his fingers and Larry fought with bare fists. It all happened within the space of seconds. The guttural voice shouted a command, and the next thing Larry knew, he was lying on his back staring up into the glaring eyes of a fierce Alsatian. Two paws rested heavily on his chest, and the fangs were within inches of his throat.

In the deepening dusk, Frederick stood towering above him, a nasty sneer on his bloated face. He picked up the bottle, which had rolled down a little mound of sand. "So! You haf the papers."

Larry tried to get up, but a fierce snarl greeted his efforts. He felt the hot acrid breath of the beast on his face. "Call your dog off!" he cried, and a rumbling growl drowned his words.

Frederick looked at the bottle with interest. He was

smiling, but the smile did not reach his eyes. Rubbing the back of his flabby hand against his chin he looked down at Larry. "So, you vish to visit my land! Very well! You shall stay as my guest, until I choose to let you go. My dogs will stay with you. If you do not move or speak they will do no harm, but if you make a sound, or stir one inch——!" He laughed, a low sinister laugh. "They will know what to do. They are well trained. It was fortunate that I find this," he waved the bottle, "before your interfering fingers pry into my affairs."

Frederick turned to go, and then—as if having second thoughts—he bent down, stuffed a dirty handkerchief into Larry's mouth, securing it with his old silk scarf. Then seizing Larry's own belt he tied his hands fast. With a vicious kick at the helpless figure lying at his feet, he walked away, leaving Larry alone with the dogs.

Once he tried to straighten his legs so that he could lie in a more comfortable position, but with a tremor of alarm he felt the fangs of the other dog touch his legs.

Larry closed his eyes. "Just keep cool," he said behind his teeth, and tried to fight off the numbness which came creeping over him.

"Don't move—don't relax—don't sleep or lose control. Your only hope is to keep quite still—quite calm. It can't last for ever. He's bound to come back—sometime."

Dave looked again anxiously at his watch, "Been gone two hours now! It's no use, Pete! We can't hang around any longer."

Pete nodded. "Wish we'd never agreed to let him go. He'd no right to——"

"Oh, shut up!" Dave interrupted, with some irritation, "unless you can think of something helpful." Then with sudden decision. "We'll go back and look for him. It'll be dark in another half-hour, and then——"

They reached the spot where Larry had climbed over the

wire, reminding each other uneasily that he *could* have come back another way. "This time, we'll draw lots if you don't mind," Pete said with emphasis. "One of us is goin' to look for Larry."

"It'll have to be a toss up," Dave said, fishing a coin out of his pocket.

Dave won the toss, and Pete helped him—rather sourly—over the barbed wire. "Stay around, Pete," Dave advised. "You never know!"

Pete nodded, making little attempt to hide his disappointment at losing the toss. "I'll be around," he growled. "It's my speciality just hanging around waiting."

Dave smiled wryly at Pete's ill-humour. "Poor old Pete! P'raps I ought to have let him come instead of me. Patience isn't his strong point."

"Wonder if he *did* go back another way! Surely if he was in trouble he'd hear my voice or the whistle—unless——!" Cold fear gripped him. What if some disaster had befallen Larry! He called again. "Larry! Larry!" but his voice died away in the dark drizzle.

Finally it was the dogs which drew Dave to the spot where Larry lay, motionless and half paralysed with the strain and anxiety of keeping so rigid. The dogs heard Dave approaching and growled menacingly.

Why doesn't Larry answer me? Dave thought desperately. I don't even know whether he's there or not! It occurred to Dave, hearing the snarling dogs, that it would be wiser to retreat, but "Hang it all," he muttered. "I've come to look for Larry, and look I shall. I'm not going back till I've made sure."

Cautiously he crept nearer, and with every step the growling became more ominous. "Larry!" he called again. "Are you there?"

Suddenly Larry's muffled voice reached him. "Go away, Dave. They'll tear us to pieces."

So he *was* there! Dave threw caution to the winds and

plunged forward, and after that everything happened in a flash. Dave rushed in to try to drag Larry from under the dogs, and immediately, one of the dogs pounced on Dave, flinging him to the ground.

"Keep still—don't move!" Larry managed to splutter through the gag in his mouth.

For a moment Dave was winded, but looking up into the red glaring eyes, shining luminous in the half-light, he recognised the futility of struggling. "So now they've got the two of us nicely pinned down," he muttered with disgust. "What a mutt I've been! Why didn't I realise what had happened instead of blundering into it like this. Now we'll have to wait for Pete, and goodness only knows what *he* can do when he does come!"

Dave quickly discovered that each time he tried to speak or move the fangs closed in on him. "Better be safe than sorry," he advised himself grimly.

And presently, as they lay there—unable to communicate by word or sign—it dawned on them that Pete's inevitable arrival might not be their salvation after all. The dogs might well be disturbed and kill one or both victims before attacking a third intruder. So it was with mixed feelings that they waited for Pete, who was bound to come—sooner or later.

Meanwhile Pete waited, occasionally stamping his feet and flapping his arms in sheer boredom. He paced backwards and forwards, each time pacing a little farther along the stretch of barbed wire, feeling like a sentry guarding a frontier.

He found himself wondering just how long to wait before taking action, and what kind of action to take. "I really ought to have a torch," he reminded himself, realising that it was too far to go back to the house. "Wonder how far it is to Kees's house!" he murmured. "But no, I couldn't go worrying them at this time. All the same, Kees would be jolly useful!"

And as if in response to his wishful thinking, he heard—not far away—the sound of hurrying footsteps. Pete crouched behind a hillock to watch. His eyes had become accustomed to the gloom, and he saw that there were two people. “They’re in some hustle—whoever they are!” Pete muttered. “Why, one’s a girl—like Maryke! Gosh! It is Maryke and Kees. Oh, gee! What luck! Hi there!” he called. “What’s up, you two? Where might you be rushing to at this time?”

They stopped, hearing Pete’s voice; and Kees explained hurriedly what their errand was. “We have learn that one boy is a prisoner in danger with the dogs. We have come to help.”

Pete walked with them as Kees told what had brought them. Maryke, it appeared, had gone home after they left the boys. Uncle Frederick was out, but came in later, carrying the bottle; and Maryke had heard him telling Willem how he had found it, and how he had left the “English brat” lying there guarded by the dogs.

Uncle Frederick, after tearing up the papers and burning them, had stamped up to Maryke’s mother’s room and told her brutally that they would have to go; that he intended selling the property and going back to his own town, and that he could no longer support them. He also said that Jan would not be allowed to come back.

Maryke ran out to tell Kees and his mother. Mrs. Van Dongen put on her coat, promising to fetch Maryke’s mother into her own home. Maryke and Kees then came with all haste to try to rescue Larry.

Pete digested all this as they made their way into the forbidden part. Kees had come armed with wire clippers and torch, and soon they were heading speedily towards the spot where Larry—and now Dave—lay helpless.

Maryke spoke quickly to Kees, who explained to Pete. “Maryke think she know the words to speak to call off the dogs. She will try the—what you call it—signal, she knows—

but if it not the success, if it fails—we have one fearful thing to do.”

“What do we have to do?” Pete whispered urgently. “You can count on me to do what ever you say is needed.”

“There are two dogs, and we have to do the dangerous action.” He explained by demonstration, how, if necessary, they were to rush at the dogs, tackling one each; and force open their mouths to break the jaw. “It is the only way,” Kees said grimly. “Here is a thick glove. One each for our hands.”

Pete took his glove and found that his own teeth were actually chattering. A wave of sickness swept over him and he almost staggered, but he assured Kees that he would do what was required.

As they drew near the spot, Maryke took command, telling the boys to stay at a safe distance until she gave the signal. Pete’s heart pounded into his eardrums as he heard the growling dogs quite near now. Then Maryke gave a peculiar whistle, followed by a sharp command. It was impossible to see what effect this had on the dogs, but to Dave and Larry, it was as if she waved a magic wand. The huge dogs pricked up their ears, stopped growling, and left their victims free to jump up.

Even when Dave sprang up, the dog remained—as it were—frozen. Kees moved forward with the torch, and a moment later Larry was free from his bonds, rubbing his stiff aching bones. “Come on, let’s get out of here as quick as we can,” Dave urged. “Let’s leave all the explanations till later.”

Which they did of course, and once outside the barbed wire enclosure the gabble began. Some of it made sense, but some parts seemed quite incomprehensible. “At all events,” Dave summed up, “the escapade hasn’t been wasted. Even though Operation Bottle didn’t go according to plan, Uncle Frederick was fooled just the same.”

Only one problem remained. How to get Jan back home

so that he could take some action before Frederick started negotiations for selling the property. "But we'll have to leave that problem till to-morrow," they all agreed. And half an hour later they were all sound asleep in their respective beds.

No one was surprised next morning when Maryke and Kees arrived at the house with news that Mrs. Van Dongen had—so to speak—wiped the floor with Uncle Frederick, and helped Maryke's mother into her own house where she was now resting happily, after hearing the wonderful news. "Only one thing troubled her now," Kees added.

"You mean Jan?"

"That is so," said Kees. "But to-day we have the message from Jan. He is try to escape."

"To escape! Good old Jan. How will he manage?"

"I have to go out to the small island with de boot, and——"

"D'you mean boat?" Larry asked.

"Ja! De boat."

As they talked, Maryke looked anxiously from one to the other. It was terribly important that the boys should volunteer to go with Kees to help to row. Jan had sent word that he was making a dash for the coast, where he hoped to get across to the small island in one of the fishing boats. It was his only chance as he had neither friends nor money, so he depended on them to row out to the island to pick him up. Maryke could scarcely hide her agitation, and she was so overcome that tears began to trickle down her cheeks. But she brushed them away and laughed, to show that they were tears of joy, not sorrow.

"Have you any idea when he will arrive at this small island?" Dave asked.

Kees consulted the letter. "Ja! It is to be at midnight."

"And how long will the journey take?" Larry asked.

Kees thought about four or five hours. He had been out

to the island several times, but always in the day-time. But he seemed quite confident about finding his way, provided he had some help with the rowing. Kees looked up hopefully for their assurance.

"Of course we're coming," they assured him. "Just you try keeping us away."

"Now for the details," said Dave. "If it's an open boat we'll need to wrap up, and we'll need some grub."

"Grub! What is grub?" Kees asked, puzzled.

When they explained, Kees laughed. "My *moeder* will see that we have food. She make the good pies of meat and fruit and cake and scone."

Kees added that he had still to check up about the tides, but if they would come round at six o'clock, he would have the boat and everything ready.

Maryke smiled happily as they departed. Everything was going to be all right. They were going to rescue dear Jan—and then everything would be wonderful.

CHAPTER XVI

THE RESCUE

THE REST of the day was like a vacuum. Nothing that happened had any meaning or significance except in relationship to the forthcoming boat trip. A moonlight row across the sea to an unknown island to rescue a runaway! What more could they ask in the way of adventure! They grinned widely as they wondered what their respective guardians would say if they but knew. "Which reminds me," Dave said suddenly, "Uncle Ben should be back any time now."

Larry and Pete looked uneasily round the room. "Hadn't we better clear a bit of this chaos?" Larry suggested.

"I'm afraid so," Dave agreed. "We're beginning to look rather untidy—and just a bit dingy."

"Looks all right to me," Pete said, but nevertheless joined in the whirl of activity when the chores got under way.

"We need a scrub up and some elbow grease. Look at the dust on this white window-sill, and the finger-marks round this door knob," Larry pointed out.

There followed a heated argument about the correct amount of soap and water needed to make a cloth damp enough for wiping paint; and then Pete, entering into the spirit of the thing, set about zealously pursuing dirt in all sorts of unlikely places. "Hey! You shouldn't wipe the polished table legs with a dishcloth," Dave objected.

"Why not?" demanded Pete, wiping up a streak of marmalade which had trickled down the table leg. Dave volunteered some technical explanations about the qualities of paint versus polish, adding. "Any fathead knows that it'll dry all smeary."

"Bit more in housework than one might imagine," remarked Larry.

"I shall live in a tent like an Arab when I leave school," Pete scowled. "I'd rather peel spuds any day than chase dirt."

"There's wood to chop if that's more in your line," suggested Dave. "Then we'll have to do some shopping. Larder's a bit low."

The cottage looked spick and span when finished and everything in place. Then during dinner the question arose, "How and where to spend the afternoon!"

To Pete, it was just so much time to be filled in before the night adventure, but finally they agreed that they couldn't do better than stroll round a few neglected parts of the sanctuary and fill up their notebooks.

Dave took one of the cameras, with the last roll of film, and in a very short time they were in the sanctuary. "Probably our last visit," Dave remarked.

"Have a shot at that fellow running over the sand near the meadow," Larry urged. "What is it, by the way?"

"Ringed plover. Yes, he should make a nice picture if I can get a bit of the yellow sand and the grass."

A blue-headed wagtail flew ahead, and Dave was so anxious to get both that he managed neither. "I'll have this coal-tit though. Nice little chap!"

"Isn't he small? Must be a young one."

"No. He's fully grown. Small species. Sh, now! Don't breathe." Click went the shutter. "I think I got him but I don't know if the exposure was long enough. You need more light for colour films."

He managed a picture of a party of redshanks feeding on the pebbly beach, and shortly after that, a white bird came gliding towards them—Larry spotted him first through the glasses—neck outstretched and bill downtilted. He checked himself with effortless grace and alighted, folding his great wings. "Spoonbill!" Dave said in a throaty whisper. "Stop there, please! Oh, don't move! Drat this shutter!"

"Is he something special?" Pete asked as Dave wound the spool to the next number.

"Not particularly special," Dave admitted. "But we want him for our collection. Make a note, please. We've got thirty-two exposures and I want to know what I've used them for."

"There's a shrike. You ought to try for him."

"No. It's a cock linnet. Think he's worth a picture?" But before anyone could reply the linnet determined otherwise and made off.

"Wish we had the ciné. Those godwits are a marvel. Just watch their flight. It's what Uncle Ben would call aerial evolutions."

"There's a ruff. You wanted a ruff didn't you?" Pete said. "He's rusty red with black and yellow splodges."

"I'm really after the bright orange, or else the brown and white. He's not bad though. I'll risk a shot if he comes near enough."

"I can hear a redstart singing somewhere amongst the trees."

"Yes, we'll be after him shortly."

A little later, walking along a path through the long grass they watched the arctic terns, looking almost dazzling against the clear blue sky.

"Wish I could get that redshank," Dave said with a yearning note in his voice. The sunlight caught the edges of his puffed feathers, making them appear silver and orange.

"Well, why not?" said Pete. "He's not so far away."

"He's right against the sun, and if I snap now he'll come out just a black shadow."

"What about this fellow on the branch here? He looks a bit of all right! His feathers look almost silvery."

"Oh, yes! A whitethroat! We have them at home. No use wasting films on birds we can take any time."

An icterine warbler chattered tunefully from above, and was answered farther away by a garden warbler. But it often worked out that the birds with the sweetest song were not always the most handsome and colourful, and of course vice versa. "Which," as Pete remarked philosophically, "proves that you can't have everything."

They explored a new part of the sanctuary where none of them had been before, and as they tramped over the dunes they came upon an artificial lake formed by banking up the sand. On the far side, among the reeds, a whole colony of spoonbills were feeding their young. Larry felt quite a thrill of excitement when he discovered a montagu harrier's nest with two eggs and three young ones. "We must have a picture," he insisted.

"You're right!" Dave agreed enthusiastically. "And I must have this cock wheatear. Looks as if he's standing

sentinel on top of this wall. Oh—what gorgeous water-lilies. Wonder if I can get them on one of my pictures.”

“Why not try from over there, where those baby terns are swimming about? They ought to show up well against the white lilies.”

“They’re like little jet black corks floating on the water,” murmured Pete, busily scribbling his notes.

In the quietness of that part of the sanctuary they found that their ears as well as their eyes picked out various birds. The reeds seemed full of warblers darting in and out—chiding each other and scolding—and the great reed warbler of course loudest of all, trying to drown the rest.

A sudden high piping note disclosed the whereabouts of the great bearded tit, but he was too much in the shade. And so it was with many others. Dave could not get all the birds he wanted into his pictures, nor could he be sure that everything he snapped would turn out well, but by teatime he felt reasonably satisfied that there would be at least a *few* treasures.

In spite of Pete’s misgivings they were at the Van Dongen’s house long before six, and Kees showed them the hamper his mother had provided.

Mrs. Van Dongen also insisted on providing extra blankets, scarves, and some cushions. “You must row in twos,” she said to Kees. “And the two who are not rowing must rest on the cushions.”

Maryke was, if possible, more excited than the boys, and she begged them to come and meet her mother.

“Yes, we’d like to do that,” Dave smiled. “Then we can assure her that we’ll bring Jan back with us.”

Maryke’s mother, now comfortably installed in the Van Dongen spare bedroom, sitting up with a white shawl round her shoulders, greeted them eagerly. Her thin, sunken cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright, as she told them in broken English of her gratitude.

"You have done so much for us," she smiled. "We can never repay. And now you go to bring back my Jan."

Mrs. Van Dongen would only allow them to stay a few minutes, "She must not talk too much," she explained. "She is very weak and needs much rest and care."

Maryke went with them to the boat and waved to them as they pushed off. In fact she stood there waving until they were far out to sea. And then, when the land had receded into a thin line, Pete felt his excitement subside.

The calm waves offered no resistance as the boat cut evenly through the greying water. The sun's low rays caught them at an angle, but soon it would dip down and then there would be the moon's pale light.

Larry and Kees rowed first, and after an hour Dave and Pete took over, and when the conversation petered out there was nothing but the rising swell of the boat as it rode the waves.

The sun dropped beyond the horizon and in the dusk before the moon came up the sea looked dark and forbidding. "It's like being out on the open sea in a cockleshell," yawned Pete, fatigued from his hour of rowing. They were glad of the cushions, and of the blankets and scarves, for a chilly breeze sprang up.

Kees dipped into the hamper and handed out the refreshments. "We will have one small flask of coffee now," he suggested. "And we will save the big one till Jan can share with us."

"These pies are absolutely super!" stated Dave with relish. And Pete, his mouth full, told Kees how lucky he was to have such a mother.

Kees nodded. "My *moeder*—she good lady."

Larry was rather concerned to know how Kees could be sure of the right course, and Kees said simply, "We have the compass and the moon and stars to guide us. Only a gale could send us wrong place."

Indeed they need have had no fear. Kees had steered a

clean course to the island, and at least half an hour before they were due to land they saw its dim shape lying there like a huge tortoise on the horizon.

"Good job there's a moon!" Larry said, marvelling at the calm way Kees assumed that everything would go according to plan. As they drew near to the island the rowing became harder, and Kees explained that the tide was turning. "So all we need hope is that Jan will be waiting, so that we can row back with the tide?"

"That is so," agreed Kees. And suddenly there came from the direction of the island, a long low whistle. Kees answered immediately, and then followed a series of whistles in various tones and lengths. "It is Jan," he told them. "He says we no can land this side. He have tell me where to go."

Presently they pulled the boat into a tiny cove, and Jan helped to haul them in. They all hopped out, glad to stretch their legs, and then in an excited gabble, everybody tried to explain everything to everybody else.

Jan was wet and shivery, having jumped out of a fishing trawler when nobody was looking. "If I had not jumped at that time I would now be near the Norwegian coast," he said, adding that he had been unable to light a fire as he was afraid of attracting attention.

"Well, we'll soon have a jolly old blaze. We could all do with a warm up," said Dave. "I have some matches here."

Twigs were gathered, and soon they were drinking hot coffee round a crackling fire. Jan was allowed to eat his fill before the others touched a crumb, because he had had neither food nor drink since early morning.

Amid the confusion of eating and drinking and clothes drying, they managed to tell Jan the story of how they had found the documents, and of the trick they had played on Uncle Frederick.

Jan was overjoyed at the good news and all but embraced

them. Kees also told how his mother had rescued Maryke and their mother from Frederick, and Jan was deeply gratified. "My *moeder*—she need a happy contentment," he said. "And now, thanks to all of you, she will get well and strong."

During the return journey they discussed at great length the steps Jan would need to take, to prevent Frederick from doing further harm. And now that the documents were discovered, and his mother out of Frederick's house, Jan felt confident about tackling the problem. "He will make trouble—plenty trouble," he laughed. "But we also will make big trouble for him."

"And for Willem?" amended Pete.

"And for Willem," Jan agreed.

As they drew near to their own island the dawn had broken—like lifting a misty curtain—and the sea changed from grey-black to a paler, softer grey. The air was still chilly and they felt stiff and cramped, and very very sleepy; almost too sleepy to stagger out of the boat.

And back at the cottage they piled into bed, where they slept solidly until midday, when they were awakened by persistent knocking on the door.

It was Jan and Maryke and Kees on their way to the mainland to make an appointment with a good lawyer about the documents. "When we have done this we go for some—what you call it—merryfication."

"Jollification! Celebration!" supplied Pete and Larry.

"How about joining their 'merryfication'," suggested Dave. "We have enough money left for a bit of a fling, and by golly we've earned it."

"Goodo! Sounds just the ticket!" yawned Pete. "But nothing too strenuous. A couple of hours at the cinema would just about suit me."

After they had gone, Pete was still thinking in terms of the cinema. "Wonder what kinda films they'll be showing. Don't think I can raise enough excitement for a cow-

boy, an' I don't somehow fancy a travel——" and suddenly he began to laugh. "I say! What prize clots we are!"

The others stared at him. "What d'you mean? What's up?"

"Not much use going to the jolly old movies after all. We don't know what they're yattering about. The talking will all be in Dutch!"

"Gosh, yes! Why ever didn't we think of that before?"

"I'll tell you why," stated Dave. "Because we can't get used to the idea that *we're* the foreigners and that any language is as important as our own."

"I think you may be right," conceded Larry. "But what else can we do?"

"Oh, Jan and Kees will think something up. Let's see what they suggest when we meet them."

It was Maryke who exclaimed, clapping her hands gleefully. "*Kermis! Kermis!*"

Jan and Kees smiled with indulgent approval, and the English boys nodded their agreement, feeling a little bewildered as they followed, through a maze of streets.

Suddenly Pete's ears flapped. "Listen! Can you hear what I can hear?"

They stopped to listen. "Roundabouts! We're going to the Fair!"

"*Ja-ja! Kermis!*" cried Maryke, her plaits dancing with excitement.

"And here it is! Just like ours!" exclaimed Pete, his weariness dropping like an unwanted cloak. "There's swings an' coconut shies an' flying boats. Yippee! Let's have a go on the bumper cars."

"Just one moment," halted Dave. "Before we begin our binge we have one little matter to settle." He tactfully explained to Jan and Kees that it was their custom to pool all resources at the beginning so that nobody was left out of anything. The Dutch boys, having only a very few

guilders to spend, protested, but Larry explained that their refusal would give offence.

The share-out provided a nice little jingle in all their pockets, with just enough left for the return fare on the ferry.

Pete's exuberance zoomed as they sampled ice-cream and *popjies* (a kind of salted pop-corn). They passed a stall where a huge fat man stood slitting raw herrings, just as on the day when they had arrived, but instead of Willem to demonstrate, Jan and Kees tried unsuccessfully to tease *them* into trying one.

It was wonderful wandering round amid all the hustle-bustle, with noises coming from every direction—musical and unmusical—and smells, some sweet and some savoury. Suddenly Pete's nose twitched. "Something smells jolly nice. C'mon, let's investigate."

They sniffed their way through the crowd towards a stall where customers were eating hot fritters out of paper bags. "*Poffertjes!*" cried Maryke, with approval, as they took their place in the tiny queue.

The *poffertjes*, cooked on a hot stove, were unanimously declared "spiffing." "We oughter have them in England," Pete stated, his teeth closing round the hot crisp savoury. "I reckon they'd sell better than fish an' chips."

"But not these, eh!" Larry said with a snort of disgust as they moved towards the next stall. An outsize bowl, as big as a baby's bath, was filled with whitish fluid, rather like cloudy water, and floating in the fluid—like rubber dinghies on a pond—were dozens of fat sausages, which appeared to be raw.

"Suffering sausages!" Pete shuddered. "Don't they look ghastly?"

"Absolutely revolting!" muttered Dave. "Move on—quick—before they want us to try them." Then, in a brief minute, while out of earshot from Jan and Kees, he added, "Better not tell Uncle Ben that we shied away from the

raw herrings and those awful sausage things. He says it's good manners to try all national foods when you visit a country."

"Well, I'm afraid that if the test of my good manners depends on eating one of those slimy monstrosities, I'll have to accept a black mark," Larry admitted.

"I couldn't eat one if my life depended on it!" Pete groaned.

"Nor me!" grimaced Dave. "But Uncle Ben eats everything. Frogs' legs in France, sharks' lips in China. He tells a good story about his Chinese host, who said to him, 'You eat him while you have the chance. He eat you if he get the chance'."

Their laughter merged in with all the other laughter, and the sausages were left behind. Maryke's eyes were bright and her cheeks pink with excitement as they moved from skittles to flying saucers; from hoop-la to helicopter.

When it was time to go, Kees and Jan tried to express their thanks. Never before had they enjoyed such "merryfication", they said, earnestly. And the three boys agreed that they also had enjoyed the trip to the mainland, and the *Kermis*. It was, they felt, an appropriate finale to all the tense excitement of the last few days.

Coming back on the ferry, Jan, Kees and Maryke sang Dutch songs, and then they asked the others to sing an English song. But not even the carefree Pete had the courage to burst into song.

"I'll whistle if you like," he volunteered. "But I draw the line at singing in public."

Coming as he did, from the north of England, the tune that came most readily to mind was "On Ilkley Moor" and he began to whistle softly. The others whistled and hummed with him, and then a voice from one of the other passengers began to sing the words. Soon it was taken up by others—humming, whistling and singing—and Larry and Dave, taking courage from this community effort, joined in also

with the words. By the end of the ferry trip almost the whole load of passengers had joined in.

"How did they all know the tune—and the words?" Pete said with astonishment as they wandered homewards.

"Sometimes we listen to the British broadcast on our radio," Kees told him with a twinkle.

They bid good-bye to the three Dutch friends, realising that their holiday was almost at an end, and that possibly they might not meet again. There were promises to write, all mixed up with thanks and farewells. Then, as they turned the corner to their house, Pete shouted, "Look! There's a light in our window. Somebody must be inside."

CHAPTER XVII

HOMeward BOUND

THEY RAN to open the door, each wondering something different. Pete was convinced that Frederick or Willem was ransacking the place, or up to some mischief. Larry wondered if they had accidentally left a light on when they went out, but Dave said with rising excitement. "It's Uncle Ben. He must have come back."

Dave was right. Uncle Ben was sitting in the armchair, puffing his pipe, with a half-empty cup of coffee at his elbow. "Oh, hallo you rakes!" he greeted. "So you haven't *quite* deserted the old homestead!"

"We didn't know you'd be back or we wouldn't have gone out," Larry apologised.

"Oh, that's all right," he assured them. "I didn't quite know myself whether I'd make it to-night, so I couldn't let you know." Then after a brief pause he added, "I'm afraid we'll have to pack our bags and set off back to-morrow. I have some urgent matters to discuss with the firm."

To his surprise, not even Pete raised any objection, and slightly nonplussed, he asked, "I—er—hope—you haven't been too bored while I've been away?"

"Bored! Crumbs! I should jolly well think not! What ever gave you such a crazy idea?"

"Oh, well, it struck me that you didn't seem too regretful about going back to-morrow. I half-expected that you might be agitating for an extension."

"Don't you get any funny ideas that we haven't enjoyed every minute, but—" It was Pete who summed up the situation, "it's like when you've stuffed yourself to bursting point—you're not so keen on the sight of food."

"Fact is, we've had such a hectic time that it'll be a relief to relax," Larry explained.

"Hectic time? A few more details wouldn't come amiss. You may recall that I went off hoping to see Herr Zinkerman, but you appear to have lost all interest in that little project."

For a few seconds there was dead silence. So *much* had happened since he went away that they had in point of fact forgotten about that part of his errand. There was so much to tell that nobody knew where to begin. "And you missed the old boy of course," Dave said.

Uncle Ben looked up suspiciously. "Why 'of course'? How d'you know we missed him?"

Then out it came. The whole story from the moment of his going to that very moment now. It came in garbled sentences, competing with each other for speed and pitch, some of them quite incoherent and almost irrelevant.

Uncle Ben listened with growing astonishment, never noticing that his pipe had gone out and his coffee gone cold. Occasionally he broke in to clarify a few facts. "So Zinkerman actually came here and you met him! No wonder there was such a veil of secrecy. Freek and I couldn't figure what had happened."

The story went on long past supper time; about the message, the finding of the documents, the excitement with

Frederick and his dogs, and the tricks they had played on Frederick and Willem. And in amongst it all came the news of how they had completed the bird pictures.

"If Dave hadn't been so keen on getting pictures of that rare bird we'd never have discovered the documents," they added.

Uncle Ben received it all with mixed feelings ; proud that the boys had achieved so much, but dismayed when he realised how near they had come—on more than one occasion—to disaster. "Well !" he said at last. "Well ! All this is enough to bowl over a stronger man than your Uncle Ben ! There was I, fretting and fuming because I thought I'd missed all the best pictures and that the holiday had been a fiasco."

"Of course we don't know for certain that the pictures will turn out O.K." Dave admitted modestly.

"We never know that, do we ? Not until the films are developed. Even the most expert photographer has to take that risk." Then, turning to the subject of Jan and Frederick, "So now I gather that Jan is taking the necessary steps to establish their rights ?"

"Yes, he's been to see the authorities, and it won't be long before everything is put to rights. Frederick will not be able to sell that plot of land now and ruin the sanctuary. Won't Mr. Jansen be pleased ?"

Uncle Ben nodded. "He certainly will ! Won't we all ! And I mean all ! Some of these Islanders are going to be more than grateful for the information you've discovered for them. And you know," Uncle Ben relit his pipe thoughtfully, "all this reveals a most interesting point, and ties up with something we learned about Mr. Steen while we were away. He had some information which he refused to divulge to the enemy. Perhaps *this was the information*—the plans where valuables were hidden !"

"Yes, it could be that ! And he hid it all in that cute place."

"We think Frederick must have heard something about it too. Maybe something leaked out."

"Yes! I'm quite sure you're right! That would account for his peculiar behaviour. No doubt he intended to get all the valuables for himself, then sell the land for the experiments. Anyhow you've stopped his little game. All credit to you!"

Next morning as they reached the ferry a surprise awaited them. It was as if the whole island had taken a holiday and turned up to see them off.

There was Freek and his mother and father, Jan, Maryke, Kees and Mrs. Van Dongen, and scores of others. Word must have flashed like lightning round the island, for there they were, lined up to shake hands and cheer and wave them good-bye.

"Even Royalty couldn't have had a better send-off than that," said Dave.

"It seems months and months since we were here before," Larry observed as their boat drew into the harbour on their own side of the Channel. This time, however, their enthusiasm was tempered with a quality born of experience. They were now hardened travellers and could afford to take it all in their stride. No rushing around, goggle-eyed!

Even through the customs their curiosity was a thing to be kept under restraint, and they watched the harbour officials and boatmen with calm detachment. Only when their battered little car was being swung down did a queer thrill run through them. "Another ten minutes or so now," said Uncle Ben, "and we'll be on the road home—driving on the left again."

The joy and spirit of a holiday is always recaptured with the developing of films, but they awaited theirs with more than the usual interest. In fact, Dave spent his waiting days in a state of acute anxiety.

He need not have worried, for the films that Dave took

were—if not perfect—at least good enough to show. “You did a great job,” Uncle Ben praised warmly.

“I could go on gazing at them over and over again,” Larry declared. “Especially the colour pictures we all had a hand in.”

“And of course the special rare ones where we found the documents in the bottle,” Pete added. “We must send Jan a copy.”

Which of course they did, and when his reply came, there was news of all the events on the island. Uncle Frederick, it appeared, had somehow realised that his little game was up, and fled, taking Willem with him.

Meanwhile Jan’s mother was much improved in health, and along with Maryke and Kees, sent her warmest wishes to all of them; also many people on the island, some of whom had already recovered their things. The letter ended with a pressing invitation for all of them to come again next year, “To stay with us,” Jan insisted. “Our *moeder* wish it very much so that she can give thanking to you for all your help and for our great happiness.”

“D’you think we might be able to go?” Pete asked. “It would be jolly nice to go and stay with Jan.”

“I think they will be greatly offended if you *don’t* go,” replied Uncle Ben. “And friendships of that kind are too precious to destroy.”

“Don’t worry!” said Larry. “We’ll see that the friendship is kept alive and warm. We’ll write every week—starting this very minute.”

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